SONG-BIRD

SOPHIA CLEUGH

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SONG-BIRD

BY

SOPHIA CLEUGH

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TO
MY DEAREST
DENNIS

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and faggots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will —
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson.

SONG-BIRD

CHAPTER I

I

RARELY did the beautiful woman whom some called the Nightingale, and others the Song-Bird, ever waste her valuable time in looking back on her strayed and acrobatic girlhood.

However, to-day, on her fortieth birthday — though her press agent would not let her pass officially beyond the marking of her thirty-fifth anniversary — as she sat at her writing-table in the window of her music-room, high above the street, in that new and expensive block of studio apartments which faced Central Park at its southern end, her thoughts were far away from the restless, humming life of the New World and Age and were back in distant Ronda: that sleepy little white town of ancient Spain above which rise the far-flung cork woods.

Smiling the inscrutable, half-wistful, half-gay smile that had, as much as her art, helped to make her famous, she recollected that her lot had changed, overnight, with the finding of the golden horseshoe.

She had been idly leaning against the wall of that poor ill-kept inn which Rodriguez had always made his headquarters when not on the road with his company of acrobats, her arms wrapped in her torn apron, watching the twins, Miguel and Manuel, tumble in the empty road,

when the glittering object caught her eye. It was away in the dusty rut a little to the right. And so far, thank the Holy Virgin, no eye but her own seemed to have fallen on it.

With that wariness which much experience had taught her, she moved lazily toward it. An arm outthrust, a swift look about her, an equally sudden stooping of her lithe young body — and the strange object was hers.

Still humming under her breath, she remained on the spot, kicking up the dust for a moment or so, before she ventured to hide the treasure-trove in the bodice of her ragged dress. That done, she strolled back to her old position by the open door, humming contentedly.

Coming down the street was an elderly man driving a primitively constructed cart full of barrels of wine.

Nina Hanana — afterward to be so widely acclaimed as Nina de Segovia — called out sharply to the two wrestling urchins, 'Manuel — Miguel — take care! You will be run over!'

At the same moment Rodriguez himself appeared at her elbow in the doorway of the inn.

He was swarthy and short, even inclined to stoutness, and wore earrings in his really beautifully modeled ears. But for all his too rapidly increasing girth, he was yet one of the most active and clever acrobats in his well-known and popular troupe. He had been since a boy one of the famous Malida's widely known traveling band of jugglers and acrobats; and still was as happy in his calling as he had been from the first day he consciously remembered facing an audience. That life had always satisfied him completely, so full as it was of movement

and travel. Never long in any one place, he had by this time journeyed half over the world, accumulating by degrees, and at different times, half a dozen wives — mostly temporary and unofficial — and two sons of whom he was exceedingly proud. Nina was no kin of his, but useful to look after the twins and decorative enough to dress the stage as well as to perform certain acrobatic dances he had carefully taught her.

Now, hearing her voice, sharpened by an exasperated anxiety that was never wholly absent whenever she was in the least answerable, by reason of being in their vicinity, for the bodily safety of his good-natured, disobedient little sons, he called out:

'Boys, for once do me the favor to obey la Nina. I do not wish to be at the expense of your funerals, however simple, before the season for earning has even commenced.'

'And when it has,' reflected Nina, 'such ceremonies would be less welcome than ever.'

Temporarily, at least, heeding the voice of authority, although with the most perfect indifference, the twins halted their friendly and complicated wrestlings, stared unconcernedly down the street at the approaching vehicle, then scrambled agilely out of the direct path of the ponderously moving wine cart.

'Hola, Pepe!' called out the darker and taller of the two to its driver, who, jolly and rubicund of countenance, sat fatly enthroned upon the rough planking which served as driving-seat. 'How goes the world in Ronda? And with you? Let me inform you that a little bird whispered to me yesterday that the Alcalde was asking very curiously after your private activities.

And not solely on account of their general usefulness, neither.'

Rodriguez uttered a wrathful oath. 'Be silent, Miguel,' he shouted harshly. 'You will yet earn a beating before the day is over, I can see that. Pay no attention to his senseless prattle, Pepe.'

In a tone so low that it reached only the sharp ears of Nina, for whom it was intended, his brother muttered: 'Miguel has no discretion. He is too fond of telling the truth. Few people can bear it.' And went immediately to range himself by his too outspoken twin. For united they stood invariably to face the world and its singular manifestations; though upon Miguel, it must be admitted, no remonstrance, criticism, or advice ever had the least effect, whether backed up by physical force or mere reasonable pleading. Obviously one of Nature's born philosophers, he took the ups and downs of each day's happenings as they came, and forgot them completely in the interest of the one which followed. But Pepe, it seemed, had no intention of taking offense. Such crude raillery as Miguel's merely entertained him. He never for one moment forgot that the boy, being a stage person's brat, was undoubtedly precocious and probably knew more of the world than many twice his age, and was withal extraordinarily shrewd. Something he might have heard — somewhere. For that matter, the warning, if it were one, was not ill-timed. Pepe, like many another resident in those parts in the early years of the present century, did not lead an entirely blameless life as far as the Guardia Civil was concerned. Smuggling as a trade was too profitable. And one took the inevitable risks in the day's work.

Therefore he laughed heartily and called back in his stentorian voice: 'By the Holy Virgin, I have no wish to meet the Alcaide. He is of too severe a temperament for me. Always prating about duty and looking for trouble where none need exist. He is no friend of mine.'

Then, contemplating good-humoredly the group before the inn as he drew up, he added: 'How you grow, you two imps! But a week or two since I was this way, and you have shot up like bay trees. See that you do not come to the same untimely end as those Father Alonzo told us about in his Easter sermon last month.' Again he laughed contentedly at his own pleasantry. 'Well — here I have a letter of some kind for your father. See which of you catches it before it falls to the ground.' With that he tossed a large square envelope into the air.

As became the son of so noted a tumbler, Miguel, always a shade fleeter than his brother, caught it deftly. And, to show off yet further his mountebank talents, conveyed it to his waiting parent in a series of bewilderingly varied somersaults which forced a grunt of approval from Rodriguez, though, at the same time, his appreciation of his son's artistry did not deter him from endowing the child with a smart box on the ear on general principles as he snatched the communication from him. That attended to, he noted the letter bore a foreign postmark before he thrust it into the folds of soft red cloth he wore round his waist, and cordially invited the amused Pepe to join him in a drink within-doors.

Pepe climbed down from his high estate, stretched himself, yawned widely, observed that the steward of the Ventura estate would not receive his order of wine as

soon as he expected, and accepted Rodriguez's invitation with enthusiasm.

'Good company, good talk, and good wine should never be passed by,' he declared, tying his horse's reins to a hitching-post stuck in the ground in the angle the inn walls made a few yards farther along. Then, giving the animal a proprietary thump on its dusty flank, he sauntered, whip in hand, into the house after his host.

Perfunctorily rubbing an ear, Miguel, accompanied by his brother, went to inspect gravely the wine barrels piled up on the rudely constructed, gayly painted cart.

'All for the Duque de Ventura,' he observed. 'Well, he can afford to buy really excellent wine; or anything else, for that matter.'

'I suppose,' remarked Manuel, after a moment, 'that letter means we shall all take the road again in the morning. It could only be from Malida — he is the only one who ever writes to Rodriguez. Lucky we have the habit of traveling light.'

Nina, still carelessly draped against the inn wall, made a face at him. For all her eighteen summers and her vagabond life, she was still very much of a child at heart. 'If your father only heard you call him that,' she giggled.

Manuel shrugged his shoulders. 'But since he does not ——'

His brother, now sticking bare brown toes in the dust, looked up to remark: 'I shall not be sorry to smell the sawdust again. This place may be very healthy and' — he glanced about him critically at the white houses, the brilliantly blue sky, and the masses of wooded hills rising tier upon tier into the far distance — 'even un-

usually beautiful, which it certainly is, but nobody can deny that it is also, to folk of our temperament, as dull and depressing as the Miserere.'

Nina burst out laughing — a pleasant tinkle of sound in the afternoon somnolence of the place. 'You two boys are certainly the most puffed-up beings I know,' she drawled. 'At nine years of age to talk like old men and to pretend to so much philosophy — it's just showing off, that's what it is. You should stick to what you understand — your acrobatics.'

Miguel threw a protecting arm around his twin's shoulders. 'You forget, Nina,' he returned with cold politeness, 'that Manuel and I have been traveling ever since we were born, and in many countries. We may be young in years,' he admitted, 'but we are certainly old already in experience. Look at the women Rodriguez has imposed on us at different times for mothers — a thoroughly third-rate lot. There is not much about life we do not know — from the circus world's point of view, at least.'

Nina flung them both a look of unwilling admiration as they stood there before her, heads thrown proudly back, handsome and sturdy, and very competent. 'Not old enough, though, to be trusted to wash yourselves properly,' she gibed.

'But old enough to keep to ourselves, Nina, that you have lately managed to acquire a lover for all Rodriguez watching you as a cat does a mouse,' retorted Manuel quickly.

Under her sunburn the girl went sheet white. 'How dare you — how dare you?' she said quite low. And glanced fearfully over her shoulder.

'Manuel dares because it is true,' returned Miguel soberly. 'But you needn't look so terrified, Nina. You know very well we love you dearly. We shall neither of us give you away. All women have lovers at some time or other, it seems to us. We learnt that long ago.'

But Nina continued to regard the two boys with angry eyes. 'How dare you?' she demanded hotly once more. Then, 'I have no lover, I tell you,' she said.

'You would have much difficulty in convincing Don Esteban's mother of that,' said Manuel.

2

For the remainder of that day Nina Hanana — sitting deep in thought above the din of traffic and the thousand and one unmusical noises of modern, efficient, tower-capped New York, and at the height of her fame — remembered she existed in a passion of dread, awaiting only with a feverish impatience the moment when she might dare slip away unobserved from the inn and its strident, happy-go-lucky daily life.

That her secret, her dear secret, should be hers no longer filled her with an unreasoning sense of impending doom. How could even friendly little Manuel and Miguel have come upon it? She had supposed it too securely hidden — shut away from the world in the depths of her heart. But now, if they spoke of it so carelessly and with such authority, who might not — and not so innocently — stumble upon it in the next few hours? That possibility did not bear thinking about.

Wild with disquiet and anxiety, Nina agitatedly sought an opportunity to get safely and unquestioned out of the house. But what with Rodriguez peremptor-

ily commanding her, in addition to her customary duties, to do all the packing for the four of them — Madrid being their next objective — before she went to bed so that they might start the earlier in the morning, and the boys being particularly high-spirited and nomadic, as well as tiresomely full of tricks, toward their retiring hour, it was past midnight before the house as a whole sank at last into a safe repose, and she was able to throw a brightly embroidered shawl over her best dark stuff gown and fringed apron and climb, as had lately become her nightly habit, down from the rickety balcony outside her bedroom window, then, running on light feet swiftly through the deserted streets of Ronda out into the country, mount the first thickly wooded slopes above the town.

Once safely in the shadow of those immemorial trees in that green spot by the splashing, gurgling hillside stream she had come, so purely by chance first of all, to know so well, and at least two good miles from any one who might consider that he had the right to order her going, she halted suddenly; pausing statuelike, wrapped in her gay shawl, partly to take breath, but more to listen with an almost tragic intentness. A stray moonbeam, caught in the foliage, touched her sleek dark head lightly and the delicate pallor of most sensitively modeled features. All about her the warm and fragrant night air stirred the leaves of the trees so softly that they appeared to be continually murmuring in a kind of undertone of gentle complaint one to the other.

In the distance an owl hooted mournfully. Once she distinctly heard the daintily precise clip-clop of a mule's feet upon the town road far below her, running like a

white ribbon in the clear moonlight between bare fields, and the grinding of slow cart-wheels.

Some gypsy or some smuggler from Algeciras was out there, taking advantage of the lonely night hours. But no twig broke sharply under the quick footfall of any one coming to her. And the peace of the spot, ineffably remote and still, immediately about her continued unbroken.

'I suppose,' muttered Nina, tears welling up in her beautiful eyes, 'he's got tired and gone home. There — I dare not go. What should I do on the Ventura estate at this hour? So I shall never see him again. *Ay de mí!* now what am I to do?'

Torn with a despairing wretchedness, which only the young feel with such overpowering pain, she sank onto a jutting ledge of rock which thrust itself out over the whispering brook and dangled her feet over its mossy side. Now and then she dipped a toe absently in the ice-cold water, because to come the sooner to her rendezvous she had, very shortly after leaving the inn, removed her heavy leather shoes and cotton stockings and slung them over her shoulder, tied by their laces in a neat bundle. Now they lay forgotten on the flat surface of the rock beside her, as they were to remain for many a day abandoned thereafter — close to a little growth of delicate fern. An odd study in contrasts. Nina, her heart more and more packed with woe, continued to torment herself with fears, regrets, vain conjectures: all that paraphernalia of misery the forsaken find themselves inevitably assuming. The hard lot that was hers now seemed insupportable, and almost for the first time in her life she felt she could not continue to face it.

'Though where I should run to or what I should do, I don't know,' she reflected. 'Rodriguez would catch me in the end. He knows I am terrified of him in my heart. But to have looked once into Paradise,' she sobbed, 'and then not even to be able to say *adios* — *Madre de Dios*, that is too much to bear!'

It was at this moment that, hunting blindly in the bosom of her rough calico chemisette for a handkerchief with which to dry her tear-stained face, her fingers touched the golden horseshoe. Driven by a hundred tasks and Rodriquez's biting tongue, she had up to that moment totally forgotten the shining thing, merely transferring it hurriedly from her ragged everyday dress when she flung on her best frock to seek her lover. Then she had not even looked at it very closely. Now she drew it out of its hiding-place a little impatiently to examine it. Lying in the palm of her hand, she estimated it might have fitted the hoof of a very small pony. It was certainly gold, or she was very much mistaken; and had even been used, for its lower surfaces were a little worn away.

'But it's not much use to me or any one else, for that matter,' she said, turning it slowly about. 'I might keep it for luck. For nobody would give me much if I tried to pawn it, probably. I know the race of pawnbrokers too well.'

For the moment forgetting her earlier mood of disappointed and unhappy apprehension, she was weighing the curious thing in her hand when a voice behind her made her start.

'A thousand apologies, my Nina,' it said caressingly. 'We had a dance up at the house to-night and this is

the first moment I have been able to steal away from it.'

Nina jumped to her feet as she thrust the golden horseshoe and her handkerchief once more within her chemisette.

'Esteban!' she cried joyfully, and then again, 'Esteban!'

The young man flung his wide hat and enveloping cloak down on the rock beside her.

'Yes, *lucero de mi alma* — Esteban, at last,' he returned gayly as he took her in his arms.

But the dance that, it now became plain, he had been execrating with great heartiness, had certainly been her salvation, Nina informed him.

'Seeing that I was not able to get away here till past midnight.'

'But why was that?' he demanded carelessly; then, not stopping for a reply, pinched her ear and continued teasingly: 'But where are those earrings I gave you? You do not even wear them to meet me? What kind of a love is that?'

Nina, half afraid that he was not at bottom joking, hastened to explain they were at least safe in her pocket. 'I dared not wear them back yonder. Some one would have been sure to ask inconvenient questions.'

He held out a hand. 'Then I will set them in those pretty ears of yours, *querida*. Fish them out.'

During the process of removing those cheap coral specimens she wore daily, and replacing them with the elaborately designed diamond ones he had insisted on giving her, in spite of her hesitation and doubt as to the wisdom of being the possessor of such valuable jewelry,

Nina decided she must impart to him without any more delay the distressing news of which he was still so happily ignorant.

'I have a terrible thing to tell you,' she said slowly.

'Terrible! What a tremendous word. Well, what is it?'

Then he frowned suddenly and caught her almost roughly by the shoulders. 'Has some one ——'

'No, no, not that. But Rodriguez ——'

Again he caught her up quickly. 'Hasn't been making love to you?'

'No — do listen. You possess an unsleeping jealousy, Esteban.'

'Do you blame me for that? When you are so beautiful, Nina — and I love you so passionately!'

But Nina laughed, refusing to be sidetracked. 'Listen,' she began again. 'Rodriguez has had a letter from Malida ——'

'And who is Malida?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'It just shows how much you listen to me. I told you the other day. He is the man that owns our troupe. We are Malida's Celebrated Combination of Acrobats, Jugglers, and Wrestlers ——'

'Can you do complicated acrobatic feats?' he asked her lazily.

'No — at least not well enough for an audience.'

'Can you make rabbits appear out of top-hats, then?'

'Don't be silly — I dance. But never mind that now. What is important is that Malida has written to Rodriguez to say we open in some big Hippodrome in Madrid within the next ten days.'

Esteban repeated the last two words of her speech

reflectively, and then pinched her ear again. '*Encantadora*, you should always wear diamond earrings,' he observed. After a moment, as Nina said nothing, he added, 'But we always have those ten days.'

She shook her head. 'No — no ten days for you and me, alas. For we are to start to-morrow — at daybreak, almost. That is why I was so late to-night. I have had all the packing to do for Rodriguez and the twins, as well as a thousand and one odd jobs.'

He looked down at her thoughtfully, for, standing as she was almost within his arms, she was a head shorter than he was. Slender though he was in those days, he gave even then promise of being an imposing personage in his later years.

'They work a young girl like you much too hard, it seems to me,' he remarked.

To her own great astonishment she found herself saying firmly: 'And I cannot go on with such a tawdry life much longer — I hate it all so. But as I have no education ——'

Esteban Valdez, nephew of the vehement and easily excited Duque de Ventura — who had at that very instant just missed his irritating young relative, now that his last guest was gone, and was in consequence about to boil over as usual — sat himself down on the rock and pulled Nina down beside him. Tall and dark and aloofly handsome, and probably about twenty years of age, he had fallen madly in love with this waif of the circus and vaudeville, with a driving, elemental passion of which he had not dreamed himself capable even six weeks earlier. Deep down ashamed of the obsession, even now he hardly cared to admit to himself how she

filled his days with longing and his nights too often with dreams alone.

'There may be no need,' he said sharply, after a moment.

Nina stared at him. In the shadows of which that lovely spot in the woods was so full and which only here and there a gleam of moonlight managed to penetrate, it was hard to judge from the expression of his face what his mood was. In the light of day Nina, long trained in reading the faces of men, could have estimated to a pin's point what hold she had over him. So often in their last few meetings she had gone away wondering over his curious changes of temper, and speculating worriedly on what action or word of hers could have set astir in him some colder, more critical humor. Already she was uneasily aware of qualities in Esteban Valdez which made him at times difficult, even insensible to her sorceries.

'If I lose him,' she had already determined, 'it will be in one of those chill, distant moods of his.'

Now she asked him slowly, 'What do you mean by that?'

Instead of immediately replying to her question, he began to pull small bits of moss from the surface of the rock and fling them into the brook. Each one fell in mid-stream with a little plop.

'It is the strangest thing,' he began reflectively, 'how two people can suddenly meet and fall in love with each other, and be at the same time in circumstances that are so amazingly opposite that a meeting alone seems the last thing likely.'

'You mean — us?' inquired Nina, who was not used

to dealing in openly philosophical musings about current events.

'Yes — that means us,' he returned, with that sudden smile which always made her catch her breath.

'Naturally,' she admitted, 'if three weeks ago I had not been dabbling my feet over the side of this rock in the water ——'

'As you are doing now.'

'And you had not come strolling through the woods with that huge dog of yours, and he had not frightened me ——'

'But for the Cid I might never have noticed you.'

Nina, now encircled by Esteban's arm, could afford to smile at her fright of three weeks earlier.

'I have long forgiven the Cid,' she said. 'Where is he now? Why did you not bring him with you to-night?'

'This absurd dance ——' he explained. 'It was all I could do to slip away myself. He is sleeping peacefully in his kennel at home, I hope.'

'That's where you should be, too,' said Nina.

'Yes, I know.'

He swung round suddenly and, stretching himself at full length on the ledge, laid his head in her lap. 'Nina,' he continued, pulling at the fringes of her apron, 'you know I love you to distraction ——'

'So you have told me — many times.'

'*Reina de mi corazón* — but the fact is I am in a devil of a hole.'

Nina regarded him fearfully. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'I mean that my mother is a tremendous person ——'

'And you are frightened of her as I am of Rodriguez?'

He drew her face down to his and kissed her lazily. 'No, I am much more frightened of you,' he laughed.

'Of me?'

The utter astonishment in her voice made him laugh again.

'Yes — of you.'

'Why?'

'Don't you know that you are very beautiful? It is your type, *adorada*, that disturbs us poor creatures to our undoing ——'

'But that is nonsense. And you know I love you.'

'*Sí* — but I am very jealous of you. How do I know that you will go on loving me? — tell me that.'

This time it was Nina who laughed: because Esteban ought to know he was talking ridiculous nonsense, though she liked to hear him pretend that he was still unsure of her. After all that had happened in the last three weeks, too. It was too absurd.

'Jealous — and of whom? You know very well I have no thought for any one but you, Esteban. *Madre de Dios*, there is nobody as handsome as you in the world, I believe.'

He brushed aside her avowal to remark impatiently: 'Many men will love you, Nina, before your hair is white — I know it. That is why I am jealous.' His dark eyes met her anxious ones with a chilly sternness which made her heart sink. Lightly she laid her fingers on his lips and told him he must not mistrust her.

'I shall be faithful, Esteban. I swear it!' she cried.

But although he caught her hand in his and kissed it, he shook his head. However little she was yet aware of it, already she possessed that haunting, troubling

beauty which has throughout the ages set men's hearts on fire and for which wars have been waged, changing thereby the destinies of nations.

'You think you will be faithful, *adorada*. But the world does strange things to beautiful women, too often,' he sighed. 'And you are so perfect,' he added.

Nina looked down at him with wide eyes. 'How can you say that?' she demanded gravely.

'As a matter of fact, our love is a sin, I suppose.'

'*Sí* — but let us not think of it now.'

Her tone was so practical that it set Don Esteban laughing for the third time.

'As you command,' he replied. 'But about this journey of yours — to Madrid, was it not?'

'Yes.'

'Shall I tell you a secret?'

'Please.'

'I had come to tell you I was going away, too. My mother has suddenly decided a journey would be good for my health.'

'*Ay de mí* — I knew this was too much like Heaven to last.'

'In consequence,' he continued, 'my mother and I are not on speaking terms at present.'

'You dare to defy her?'

He patted her cheek. 'Do not look so alarmed. I am not entirely dependent on my mother. I have a life of my own to live, you know.'

The sound of rapid feet climbing recklessly and noisily through the silent wood now startled them. Esteban rose to his feet, dragging Nina up with him, and pushed her behind him. With a second quick move-

ment he picked up his cloak and hat and put them on.

'What can that be?' she whispered.

'We shall know in a moment,' he returned. 'Keep well behind me. For the person, whoever he may be, is coming toward us, or I am very much mistaken. I wish now I had brought the Cid with me. He would have warned us long ago.'

3

The spent, breathless runner turned out to be Miguel, dressed in an old jersey and still more tattered pair of ancient breeches.

'Nina! Nina!' he called out urgently, as soon as he perceived the dark shadow that was Esteban standing motionless wrapped in his wide cloak, and in a tone that, while clear enough to penetrate to both startled hearers, yet did not carry very far. 'Nina Hanana, it is no kind of use your hiding behind him.'

'I am not,' said Nina, and appeared, a second shadow, at Esteban's elbow.

'You must get away from here as quickly as you can,' pursued Miguel. 'Rodriguez is out somewhere on the hillside hunting for you. And he has a whip. He swears he will kill you when he finds you.'

Esteban uttered a violently wrathful exclamation. 'He is unaware that he will have to reckon with me,' he said. 'How did all this happen?' he demanded harshly.

Still panting, Miguel threw himself at full length on the ground at their feet.

'I have very little breath left,' he announced. '*Dios!* that was a race, if you like, and all uphill. But Rodriguez is off the scent for the moment, at any rate.' He

lay, his head supported on his arm, and looked up at them anxiously. 'But there is no time to be lost. As to how the thing happened — it was like this. Pepe came back to the inn, very drunk, after we were all asleep. He had been taking a cart full of wine barrels to the superintendent of the Ventura estate. It appears there was some festivity up at the big house — the saint's day of the Duque, I think ——'

'Never mind that now — this unlucky dance I am not likely to forget ——'

'Of which you would know more than I, naturally, Don Esteban,' finished Miguel politely.

'And this Pepe?'

'He heard gossip, it seems, there about la Nina and yourself, excellency.'

All this time, but for the curt denial at the outset of hiding behind Esteban, Nina had remained silent. But now she cried vehemently: 'Oh, how could any one there have learnt anything about us?' And, frankly terrified, her dark eyes roved about the clearing.

By this time a chill breeze had risen, and, shivering, she drew her shawl about her.

Miguel returned gravely: 'You know that Manuel and I tried to warn you this afternoon. We had heard a long story about your meeting Don Esteban in this wood only last week while we were playing *pelota* with Juan Santoja and his cousins. In fact, we had to fight most of them in the end, which quite spoilt our game. Some one must have been spying on you and Don Esteban.'

Said Esteban most viciously: 'I wish I had an idea who that could have been. I'd wring his neck for him.'

'Go on about Pepe,' said Nina.

'It seems when he arrived at the inn,' Miguel continued, 'he woke up Rodriguez at once. And the Papa was very annoyed. But Pepe insisted on his drinking with him. Remember, he was a good deal drunk then. And what he said to Rodriguez we do not know ——'

Having at last regained his breath, he sat up to listen intently for a moment or two. Nothing broke the stillness of the night but the plash and murmur of the stream and the rustling of the leaves. Having satisfied himself that his vindictively enraged parent was not in their neighborhood, Miguel went on:

'The first thing Manuel and I heard was a great noise of shouting and swearing. Then Rodriguez comes clattering past our room — we had opened the door a crack to listen — crying in one of his great voices that you were locked in, for he had tried your door on his way to bed himself ——'

Esteban caught her by the arm. 'Had he, Nina?'

'He always does,' she replied curtly. 'Go on, Miguel.'

'But he would break your door in — if you did not answer him. And Pepe, stumbling up behind, suggested you might have gone for your midnight stroll by your window ——'

Nina cried angrily. 'That Pepe — why couldn't he mind his own business?'

'No one seems able to do that,' said Miguel, and he giggled. 'This enraged the fat Papa so much that he bellows like a bull and smashes in the door. By this time every one was aroused. You can imagine the noise and the shouting ——'

'*Ay de mí*,' said Nina.

'There in the moonlight is your empty bed ——' And Miguel, being Latin, paused dramatically.

'Go on with the pretty tale,' commanded Esteban.

'And by it, on a chair, that carpet-bag you packed up the last thing, Nina.'

Practical by nature as well as by training, Miguel was not conscious of any anticlimax here, but Esteban laughed.

'Oh, *Madre de Dios!*' cried Nina, 'in it were all my clothes. What shall I do?'

'Then,' continued Miguel amusedly, 'as they most certainly did not know where to look for you — Rodriguez begins to question every one. He might have been the Alcalde. Even Manuel and I did not escape.'

Esteban Valdez took a step toward the odd little figure sitting cross-legged before him on the ground. 'And you told him?' he demanded.

Miguel made a deep bow. 'Nothing, señor. Nina is equally dear to us as to you.'

'Well — go on.'

But to be spoken to so peremptorily did not please Miguel, who drew himself up and looked as though about to refuse any further information. He had warned Nina — let it go at that. Young as he was, he had already taken a great dislike to the supercilious and saturnine young man. And privately he already considered that Nina, in taking the nephew of the Duque de Ventura for her lover, had but jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire, as he told his brother later. For what a hue and cry there would be after them — when they had disappeared. Still that was no business of his. Out of a ripe though vicarious

experience, Miguel was equally aware that to argue with a woman about the man she loves is folly — so often had this fact come to his notice during his short harlequin life. Then, remembering of what vital importance it was that this dear Nina, who had been more than any mother to them for so many years, should really put a good number of miles, and as soon as possible, between herself and the incensed Rodriguez, who — again the twins were well aware — had recently begun to cast calculating eyes of desire upon the girl, Miguel spoke once more.

'Manuel told Rodriguez he had caught you talking secretly to a gypsy yesterday. He said that would be much more likely than your being in love with Don Esteban — who was after all a great gentleman. So that put him off for a little, as he decided to search that gypsy encampment on the way to Algeciras first. But any moment now he may come up through these woods. Then when he and Pepe and the rest had departed, Manuel and I came to hunt for you ourselves ——'

He turned his head to hoot mournfully like an owl three times.

'Manuel has your carpet-bag,' he said briskly. 'And as soon as he has climbed up here with it, you'd better be off, Nina. Don't forget us too soon.'

Thus strangely and precipitately did Nina Hanana — afterward to be so widely acclaimed as Nina de Segovia — come to the parting of the ways. Within twenty-four hours she was on a small coasting steamer with Esteban, her carpet-bag, and the golden horseshoe, and on her way to the coast of North Africa.

CHAPTER II

I

With the birth of her son Ramon on her twentieth birthday — the only child she was to have — Nina Hanana faced a new crisis. By this time those earlier glamorous months spent with an adoring, apparently uncritical Esteban — wandering carelessly through strangely attractive North African cities even as far as Egypt and the Nile, where Nina lived unforgettable days on its green waters, in that most fascinating of all river craft, a dahabeah, afterward traveling lazily back to Europe by way of Greece, and even spending one ecstatically lovely spring in the flower-carpeted Crimea — had faded into recollections merely of a dead past: melancholy ashes of a fire that was all but burned out; while for six months before the birth of Ramon she had been more or less settled in a villa Esteban had insisted on renting for her close to San Remo, and very literally on the shores of the Mediterranean. The building itself — an imposing, white, terraced and turreted affair, green-shuttered, had been designed by its architect, some twenty years previously, in three tiers, each set back from the other; so that the principal rooms on every floor possessed a wide stretch of marble-balustraded balcony before their long French windows. A high-walled garden, sloping down to the beach on the Mediterranean side in formal terraces, encircled it. Here olive and ilex trees abounded and the feathery tufts of the palm. Now and then a tall cypress reared its grace-

ful head. And everywhere there were roses and mimosa. As a perfect background to it all, in the distance rose the purple and blue of the hills, far away, ever snow-capped.

In fact, as Nina admitted in after years, the spot was simply made for a pair of lovers: here, where the nights were so indolently fragrant, and day after day slipped by flower-scented. Only, alas, by this time Esteban and she had already begun to grow away from each other; cruelly, because they were both so youthful, and inevitably, because of their temperaments. Already their quarrels did not end in reconciliation, but in silence and hurt. Very little could start a wordy argument, which ended, for Nina in tears, for Esteban in a biting irony.

But, as the months went by, Nina hoped it might all be because of her state of health. And from her balcony at night she would lie on her sofa, amongst her pillows, and watch absently the twinkling lights of the town, and listen as inattentively to the endless lapping of the waters of the bay on the beach below, while dreaming of a day in the future when her baby should be the link that would keep Esteban at once her slave and her tyrant forever.

Rhythmically and tirelessly the waves came in — receded — and came in again.

During many a solitary evening she lay there drowsily, for Esteban, caught up once again in a European society to which he was accustomed, and, indeed, in which he had been brought up, was away from her far more than he should have been at such a time. He found Nina, in his young arrogance, now so uninteresting and hysterical. But he supposed all women were like that at these periods. Privately, too, he was not at

all sure that he wanted a son — not yet. Or under such circumstances. So he fled from tears and the voice of conscience, alike. Not that Nina was minding really very much, then. She was feeling much too languid and indifferent to resist actively, as she had done earlier, his frequent careless absences. But with Ramon's lusty arrival — for the strong-backed, strong-willed creature began to use vociferously a pair of naturally healthy lungs almost from his first breath — Nina ceased to be so accommodating.

Still in that golden season of existence, when the poet's 'flames in the forehead of the morning sky' are yet to be seen, her recovery was rapid; and with her strength returned her old energy and zest for life. This was surely the time when she should have been most contented with her lot. She decided to make a fight for it, until wounded pride in the end stifled love.

But, although she did not know it then, she was already playing the final desperate moves of a losing game. For on the afternoon before her grandson was born, Esteban's mother came to Nice.

Now, as every one knows, Nice — even in 1908, when the ubiquitous motor was not so entirely with us — is not far in point of mileage from San Remo, though the one resort is in France and over the other the Italian flag flies. And though on that oppressive and sultry afternoon — for Ramon was to make his appearance in the middle of a violent thunderstorm toward the small hours of the night following — Nina was far from suspecting it, her greatest enemy had arrived upon the terrain arrayed for battle, and determined that victory should be hers. For Doña Juanita Valdez, at that

date in her fortieth year, was one of those alabaster-skinned, thin-lipped, fair-haired Castilian women to whom intrigue was the breath of life. Consumed from her girlhood by a devouring jealousy, she had, as far as she dared, quarreled with and tyrannized over her sisters. When she married, it was that she might enjoy a bigger estate, a greater social prominence, than her family had ever known, and rule with a rod of iron her easy-going husband, to whom the path of deception in consequence soon presented an alluring refuge. As a mother she had tried to dominate her only child in all things, with, however, after his twelfth year, very poor success. Esteban, she found, was too hard and cold and markedly impatient of all restraining influences.

His elopement two years before with an unknown waif — a gutter-child, no doubt — had shocked her at first into a real illness, though it was more the result of the blow to her pride than anything else. That she should have had to lose her only son to a nobody, some uneducated, merely beautiful slut, enraged her so that finally she ended by having an attack of jaundice, an irritatingly banal conclusion to so much disturbance of soul. After that she bided her time patiently. And now, having learned on very good authority that he was supposed to be tiring of his absurd infatuation — as she had always tranquilly known in her heart that he would — she made up her mind that the psychological moment had, at last, arrived when Esteban might be ready to listen to her. It was high time she got him respectably married. She never for one moment forgot, even if he did, that he was his uncle's heir.

For some months she had anxiously watched the old

Duque de Ventura fail. Some day, and that day might not be so far distant either, his heart would refuse to do its work — and then —— Yes, Esteban must be prevailed on to return to Spain with her. And — perhaps with a wife. Only certainly one fit to take her place in society.

Sitting, still, in her traveling clothes as she ate a late lunch in the dining-room of her villa perched high amongst the hills behind Nice, Doña Juanita Valdez planned her campaign: while Esteban, with her letter in his pocket, idled the hours away in the cosmopolitan company he affected, and Nina Hanana alone — but for the shrewd Italian peasant woman, her maid, and the fussy little doctor Teresa had sent for in so great a hurry — bore him, after long hours of suffering, his son.

2

The sight of Ramon lying in the great carved bed beside her the next day temporarily fanned the dying embers of Esteban's passion for her into a thin flame. At least ashamed of himself that at such a moment he could have neglected her so wantonly, he fell on his knees by the bedside, and, catching at the listless hand lying on the silken coverlet, kissed it again and again, murmuring all the endearments that once she had heard almost too often.

'Nina — Nineta — *preciosa* — *primorosa* — *angel de mi vida* ——'

Only sighing faintly, Nina knew she was not that to him any more — or likely to be for many years to come. Yet once again the old thrill possessed her, worn out as

she was then after that night of pain endured, as she heard the deep tones of his voice. Shyly she moved aside the sheet to let him see the child's round, peacefully sleeping face within the circle of her arm.

'I think he is already a little like you,' she whispered, 'the *niño*.' And fell tranquilly asleep for that time with her left hand clasped in Esteban's.

But when, a month after, and completely recovered, she once more sat on her balcony overlooking the blue sea, with her child in her arms, alone for hours upon hours, Nina realized sorrowfully that week by week Esteban and she were drifting more definitely apart. Again, as in the very early days of their love for each other, Nina met a cold aloofness when she tried to discover wherein she had offended him. Such little things irritated him, too: that, strong and active, and idle as she was, she should want to take long walks into the hills at the back of the town; or that, without consulting him, she spent whole mornings wandering in the older quarters of San Remo; or that she should of an afternoon take her son — and his — for an airing in the public gardens.

Almost daily he found cause for a long sermon and almost daily he flung out of the house at the end of it in one of his cold rages.

'You do not love me any more — that is what is the matter!' Nina cried after him on one occasion.

And Esteban, barely restraining himself till he had banged the door of the salon violently shut behind him, called out wildly, '*Dios!* you little fool, that is the whole matter in a nutshell!'

Then, horrified at having at last given utterance to

the devastating disclosure, he fled at top speed out of the house. '*Dios!*' he muttered, as he ran to the station to catch by the skin of his teeth the afternoon train to Nice, 'I only hope Nina did not hear me say it.'

It was from this moment of revelation, however, that the Señora, his mother, began to have hopes of him, finding him decidedly less stiff-necked when she ventured to remind him, obliquely and satirically subtle, of those inevitable duties which still awaited a young man of his position in Spain. The great, echoing house in Madrid must not go shut up forever. The estate near Ronda sadly needed a younger, more active man's hand over it. His uncle, every year a little more failing, looked to him for help — so far, it was true, in vain. It was, indeed, time he resumed the dignified life of a Spanish person of consideration. To amuse himself with unconventional travel and companions — no nearer did she ever come to Nina — was all very well for a time. Young men naturally must find themselves — see something of the world. All that could be admitted. But such a wandering, irresponsible existence could not possibly satisfy him forever, when he remembered the traditions of his family. Some day he would see that for himself. In short, it was subtly indicated to him that he must do his best to cut the rope that bound him and become, as soon as possible, the personage of affairs and importance she had always intended him to be. Certainly in speaking of the future to a silent, apparently indifferent Esteban, Doña Juanita invariably made use of the word hope. But what she meant was — intended. Nobody recognized this more clearly than Esteban, lounging in a wicker chair, with a frown on his

good-looking face; imagining himself to be going through the worst kind of hell a man could experience. For to part completely from Nina was a step he still hesitated to contemplate.

To throw away so much loveliness and affection! It was not to be thought of. Besides — there was the child. A jolly little chap, too: already beginning to know him, Esteban fancied. With a winsome trick of twining his tiny, warm digits round his father's long, nervous forefinger: a small, clutching, trustful hand that was already reaching out to Esteban's heart. No, he certainly could not let the boy go — now he had come. Yet he never spoke of Ramon to Doña Juanita. Perhaps had he been frank in those early days, much that was to happen might never have taken place.

All this time Nina was recognizing only too clearly that always, in his heart, Esteban had been ashamed of his passion for her. And that curious feeling of humiliation he had always suffered in their relation made him cruel now. His coldness, his aloofness had always been there; submerged only for a time in the waves of his feeling for her. He had merely worshiped her beauty while daily becoming more contemptuous of her mind.

With a shrewd amusement for which he would never have given her credit, and which was to be much more an integral part of Nina de Segovia's character in the future, Nina Hanana recollected that, in their two years of wandering, Esteban had so often tried, and vainly, to remould her nearer to his heart's desire. But do what she might to please him, she could never reach those chilly altitudes of poise and perfect sophistication he admired so much. Before she knew it she would be

enjoying herself openly, or making eyes at him to try and make him flirt with her.

Now, after much furtive and anxious study, she could certainly make herself understood in two more languages, eat with the right knife and fork, and wear her clothes with distinction. Added to which under his rather impatient guidance she had done her best to assimilate a vast amount of improving literature; though why he should feel it so important for her to know who discovered America, or why the French nation indulged in a fierce domestic row in the late eighteenth century, she never could fathom. For herself she considered it of far more moment to know where the best hotels were in all those strange cities she had visited, either with Rodriguez and the twins in earlier times, or with him more recently. There was something really useful to know. But who cared if people shot one another two centuries previously? Certainly not Nina.

Finally, she had actually learned, as a last effort to win his approval, to play easy pieces upon the piano. Such as 'The Merry Peasant' and 'The March of the Men of Harlech.' Her mandolin, with its flowing ribbons and Andalusian progressions, of which she was so proficient a player, he had never cared for. Nor had he ever attempted to listen to that voice of hers which only four years later was to make her the greatest Carmen of her time. Still undeveloped, while Nina had lived with him, it had been for the most part silent. Only the sleepy baby, sucking most reprehensibly a thumb and gurgling cheerfully now and then to himself, heard her sing the ancient gypsy lullabies she knew so

well, as she sat holding him in her strong young arms on the terrace high above the sapphire waters of the Mediterranean.

But if Nina Hanana, barely out of her teens, had at last learned her bitter lesson too well, as far as Esteban's dissatisfaction with those very qualities in her went, and with which he had once fallen so desperately in love, she had also in the past two years learned something else; and something far more dangerously intoxicating. Esteban was *not* the only man in the world — as she had at first imagined. Smiling faintly, she remembered the first time she made the discovery — with how much naïve astonishment and, later, amusement. And even now, when she supposed herself to be quite heartbroken, she would experience again the delicious sense of power that knowledge brought her, whenever she thought of it.

There were other men who looked admiringly at her — openly and unashamedly. And why not? She knew herself now to be more than ordinarily beautiful. Her glass told her the pleasant tidings every day. And yet Esteban loved her no longer.

Hurt and miserable, Nina began to wonder what then made her waste her youth within four walls — and on a man who was already tired of her — since there were others in the world who could equally afford to give her all those advantages to which beauty such as hers so often falls easily heir.

Sullenly, her peasant nature uppermost, Nina began fiercely to resent Esteban's harsh determination to keep her secluded from the world. Since he no longer cared for her — to have no friends at her age, to go nowhere and see nobody, to have no occupation, to progress

merely with Ramon and his nurse from one walled retreat to another, however beautiful, was no kind of life for one of her temperament. Perhaps it was more especially irritating to her because she was by nature gregarious, and had, till Esteban had swung her off her feet, lived always in a crowd: a good-humored, slangy, kind-hearted, scandalizing, gossiping, intriguing crowd. Privacy, indeed, and a sheltered life had never really appealed to her. How should it — to Nina Hanana? — who from childhood had lived hardily in the *milieu* of the circus or vaudeville; who loved to chatter like a magpie, to dance to the click of the castanets, to hear the latest bit of scandal, to swear like a trooper if angered, to do a dozen kind little acts in a morning, to talk with her eyes to strange young men that caught her errant fancy, to scold, to jest broadly, to laugh, and above all to live every moment of the day. Nina had always been very well accustomed to look out for herself while enjoying the passing hour to the full.

But to-day — exactly four months after Ramon's birth, the precious, the *niño* — it seemed that she must now for the rest of her life live in retrospect, tied up in cotton-wool wrappings. For except for certain suddenly passionate moments on Esteban's part which were rapidly becoming more and more rare, life with him, for Nina, had become an existence of boredom, reproaches, tears, and continued misery and turmoil. To such a pass had his determination to make a *grande dame* of her brought the poor child.

It was too ridiculous — Nina, all lightness and sparkle, to be remoulded into correctness and chill restraint. Esteban expected the impossible. But love,

peace, understanding — as well as the thousand and one tranquil joys of a daily life shared harmoniously — had, in consequence, fled for ever.

3

It was one hot Sunday morning in July, and Esteban — as was becoming his custom — had retired to spend it in the calmer, if colder, airs of his mother's villa within the hills above Nice, when Nina, sitting dolefully alone on the seashore, with Ramon lying on a rug on the sand beside her, looked up from under the huge striped umbrella beneath which she lounged, to encounter for the third time the sharp glance of that prodigiously stout person who so outrageously and boisterously admired her son. A tremendous flatterer, she, but who seemed to be — for all her vulgar dressing and the loud colors she affected — somebody. Quick to sum people up, Nina considered that her hats might be atrocities, but she did possess an air of authority.

Not troubling to conceal the mirth her extravagant baby-worship aroused in her, Nina waited for her to shout, as usual, endearments at the steady-eyed Ramon, as though on a parade-ground. The grotesque, waddling figure came to a standstill before the umbrella.

'Very well,' thought Nina, casting one glance back of her to see that the green door in the wall of the garden behind her was closed, and that there was nothing to connect her with the imposing residence above them, 'let her come and talk to us again this morning. She is the only stranger I have spoken to for weeks. Heaven knows, it's dull enough to welcome the conversation of the fattest of old cooks.'

But Manja Gebirge was no cook, though the arts of the kitchen — as indeed several others — were not unknown to her.

'Good-morning,' she shouted cheerfully in a Spanish that was execrably accented, staring hardly at Nina in her white muslin with the red roses at her waist, and Ramon serenely contemplating the stupid sky of umbrella above him. 'I saw that you had that heavenly baby with you still. No one has yet stolen the lump of sweetness from you.'

Nina laughed and shook her head.

'Would you not like to have him, yourself?' she demanded, glancing up mischievously from under her flower-wreathed, shady hat.

Her visitor, always gazing at her with those calculating eyes which let nothing escape, laughed loudly and with an unaffected heartiness.

'Would I like to own that piece of sugar?' she screamed back. 'I should adore to! Though where I should manage to stow him in my small apartment in Paris, I do not know. I have hardly room enough for my grand piano and my Angora cat, as it is. All the same, for the last few days I have been seriously thinking of kidnaping the angel.'

Encouraged by Nina's open entertainment at the preposterous notion this absurd woman was advancing with such a serio-comic air, the newcomer went on gayly: 'Look, how he lies there, as seraphic as a small god of some kind! Only that I should probably kill him with cuddling — certainly bore him to tears with my attentions — I should decidedly have made the attempt.' And again her explosive laughter rang out.

'But Ramon should be flattered at so much admiration,' said Nina, her eyes dancing.

Her visitor returned her smile broadly. 'But very certainly, my dear, I should totally ruin his disposition, which is probably heavenly calm in quality,' she continued, 'by spoiling him outrageously. For I could refuse your beautiful cherub nothing.'

Then, as extravagant in her gestures as in the language she used, the flamboyant creature finished up by making a sweeping pass with her coffee-colored lace parasol at the child. The impassive infant met her advance with his usual contemplatively cool and steady look: a glance which said as distinctly as words, Does the poor fool imagine all this noisy talk amuses me? His imperturbable regard amused Manja Gebirge enormously.

'*He da!*' she cried delightedly, 'one can perceive already that he is a real Spanish aristocrat. Remote as the pole-star at less than six months. And even now regarding us women as slightly inferior beings. It is really too comic. But, like father — like son.'

At this, to her concern, she saw Nina's eyes fill with tears.

'Oh, do you imagine the *niño* could ever grow up like that?' she asked anxiously. 'If I thought so, it would make me ——'

'Even more unhappy than you are at the moment,' her new acquaintance ended shrewdly for her, looking hard at the troubled, downcast face.

Afraid that she had betrayed herself, and aghast that a perfect stranger should apparently be able to divine her most intimate thoughts and feelings with such uncanny ease, Nina cried: 'What do you mean?'

After a moment's thought, the fat woman scrambled down very inelegantly on the sand beside her. Then, opening her parasol to protect her ample person as much from the view of any chance passer-by as from the hot rays of the sun, she settled herself back against a projecting bit of rock and prepared to use to the best advantage the opening she had been seeking and had been so unexpectedly accorded. For some days past she had had that to say to this remarkably attractive and neglected girl which she felt might prove of the utmost importance to them both; for Manja Gebirge, bred up in a hard, money-loving school, was not one to waste her interest on non-commercial problems. Nor, as it happened, was she alone in perceiving future monetary gains for those who had the directing of Nina's future.

'Do you think,' she therefore began in a curiously soft tone, a complete contrast to that strident voice in which she usually harangued those about her, 'that any one as mysterious and beautiful as you can live for nearly a year on this coast, under the most intriguing circumstances, too, producing also the most lovely baby for miles around, and remain quite unknown?'

Her air becoming momentarily more and more harassed, Nina did not reply.

'Why, every one is wildly interested in you,' continued Madame Gebirge, a touch of amusement appearing in her manner. 'Everybody discusses you and your romance from morning to night.'

Although for her own ends she deliberately exaggerated the situation a little here, substantially her statement was true enough. Up and down that coast, thanks to the clever stage management of Esteban's mother,

Nina and her affairs had been themes for continual and animated conjecture for a long time.

'Don't you know you are the most fantastical, dreamlike figure, since Mistral evolved his Mireille, in the whole countryside? True, this actual spot is not Provence — but it lies next door. And any troubadour, from the Gascon Marcarbrun to Folquet, that poet-bishop himself, might have been proud to sing of you.'

Nina shook her head. Such flights of fancy were incomprehensible to her. 'But how is it possible that any one should pay any attention to me?'

Manja Gebirge tilted her parasol to shade her face more completely from the glare.

'You cannot live forever like the ostrich who buries his head in sand, and, because he sees nothing, imagines he is therefore invisible,' she said, and rapped Nina on the arm with a paper fan she had hanging by a cord from her vast waist.

But even this friendly comment alarmed Nina more than ever. What would Esteban say, she wondered, if it ever came to his ears that she was a subject for gossip? Too well she knew how coldly angry it would make him.

A silence befell then till, after a quick glance at her victim's disconsolate face, Manja Gebirge went on: 'There is nobody, young or old, who is not aware that you are here with Don Esteban Valdez; and that he ran away with you two years ago from the circus — almost. Oh, your original life has been very much canvassed, I can tell you, my dear. All the fine ladies are wickedly jealous of you. Also that that singularly spoiled and headstrong young man is the father of that lovely child of yours is no secret. But why' — she

rattled on, giving Nina no time to speak — 'why does he keep you so shut up? Are you not perfectly strong now?'

Nina nodded. 'I never felt better in my life.'

'And never looked more beautiful, I dare swear,' retorted the elder woman, always bestowing on her those hawk-eyed looks of hers. 'Then tell me why does your young sultan spend so much of his time away from you — at Nice, for example?'

Nina started and blushed furiously.

'With that starched, thin-lipped person, his mother — Doña Juanita Valdez. I was singing at an afternoon musicale she gave in her salon for some charity only last week — I am, my dear, though I say it who should not, perhaps, a very well-known singer in Europe and South America — and I don't mind confessing to you that I cannot bear the woman. Too much vinegar for me; and too much superiority. She is a perfect example of that most detestable of all things — an intellectual snob. But there was your handsome, careless lover, surrounded by all the society belles of Nice; and flirting with one sweetly pretty and affected baggage outrageously. So it is possible' — she laid a gentle hand on Nina's arm — 'my dear, that the end of your idyll is approaching. Young men are too false and fickle, it seems to me.'

For some moments after this revelation, Nina remained staring into the distant hot haze over the sea, which merged far away imperceptibly into the sky: her face a mask, determined not to let one tear fall. Her wretchedness, it is true, had reached new heights, but at the same time she was conscious of a passionate

anger and resentment which surged tempestuously through her brain. That thus roughly, and without the slightest warning, Esteban should have made it possible for her to learn from the mouth of a complete stranger how slight was the hold she had over him was too bitter. And how intentionally he must have deceived her was insult added to injury, indeed. That he should have so contemptuously concealed from her the arrival of his mother could only point in one direction. So — for the past four months, at least, the Señora Valdez had probably been encamped almost outside the walls of Nina's retreat. No wonder each succeeding week had marked a yet colder phase in their relations. His mother's influence had been rising as Nina's had been declining. It was to the Señora, then, he had fled so often to escape her tears and reproaches. It was from his mother's villa he had returned to find fresh causes for quarrel with her. The contest for dominion over him had begun, between two violently opposed natures, before Nina had even been aware there was one. And with every advantage on the side of the elder woman. Instinct, training, tradition, preference — the Señora held every ace in the pack. With increasing fear and wonder Nina allowed her mind to wander back over those fatal weeks in which Esteban, unknown to her, must have been returning more and more wholeheartedly to his former life. Polo and dancing, boating and tennis-playing — with people on his own line of march: mentally, too, of the same caliber and outlook.

Enlightened at last, Nina could guess how subtly his discontent with his present existence had been en-

couraged: how often he had been reminded it could, at best, only be temporary and episodic. Contemplating a future bereft of him, difficult and unkind as he was, tears welled up into her eyes until she could see no more through the blinding mist they created. All wounded pride now, she reflected she might as well make an end of what in the last few seconds she had been shown too clearly was an intolerable situation.

A searing pain — swordlike and biting — caught her. '*Ay de mí!*' she thought, 'now my punishment begins — for I shall always love him deep down in my heart. Yet she has managed very cleverly to steal him back from me. And there is no way I can checkmate the Señora — for the traitor is Esteban himself. Love then is dead — quite dead.'

Manja Gebirge, having shot her bolt, remained silently sitting beside Nina for a long time. There was no hurry, now that she had succeeded in gaining speech with the girl and had caught her attention. The Signor Nicolini, whose emissary she was, could have his innings any day. Probably she had given the poor child her deathblow — as far as love and trust were concerned. But Don Esteban had certainly finished with her. And there were occasions when cruelty in the end was kindness. What she had come to say to Nina would certainly be uttered — either in the next few hours or within a week, at latest.

Perfectly conscious of the cold tide of misery rising about the girl, Manja Gebirge felt genuinely sorry for her. She had been young herself — once. And though, looked at in retrospect, it caused her infinite amusement to remember what a fuss she had made when her first

lover was torn from her by an irate parent, she could appreciate the pain Nina Hanana must be enduring so proudly.

'There is no hurt like the first,' thought Manja Gebirge, and found herself sighing sympathetically: partly because she was artist enough to hate wasted time and opportunities, but more because experience warned her that Esteban's unfeeling behavior had at last killed in his lovely mistress all her pretty fancies. Never again would the world see the gentle soul which had once been hers. It was to-day, and at this instant, a hard, gay spirit was to be born that was eventually to face the public as Nina de Segovia.

After some moments, Manja Gebirge said, half to herself, it seemed: 'All the town is too well aware how he neglects you, child.'

Sidelong, stealthy, she watched the effect of her words. Nina tossed her head, scarlet, furious: 'But he does not ——' she began icily. Then, meeting the steady look bent on her, she gave the fight up and burst into a passion of tears. For some time she sobbed broken-heartedly, her tired head on Manja Gebirge's massive bosom, while the singer patted her rhythmically as a mother does a frightened child.

'There, there,' she said. 'I did not mean to make you cry. Hush, hush, my dear. You will frighten your treasure there. Probably you consider me an unwarrantably interfering old woman — and for that matter I am; but some one should have warned you long ago ——'

'What shall I do?' asked Nina, dry-eyed and tragic, at last.

'If I had had half your beauty, I'd have left him ages ago.'

Nina picked up Ramon and held him tightly to her. 'And the baby?' she asked in the level tones that were to become so well known in so short a time. 'How could I earn a living for him? Perhaps you do not know that I have neither education nor money — and I will not take the child back to where I came from: back into the life of the circus. What was not good enough for me will decidedly not be a proper life for him — *angel de mi vida.*'

The idea that Nina was without resources caused Manja Gebirge to laugh so heartily that the monstrous confection of straw, fruit, and ribbon perched precariously on the top of her mountainously dressed head nearly fell off.

'*Herr Gott!*' she shouted, 'you are singularly modest, maiden! Have you not beauty and youth and a lovely voice? What more do you ask of the high gods? — except perhaps a little determination and a touch of enterprise. Unless you belong to that vast tribe of sloths which infests the world, that always puts up with anything so that it may continue to live soft.'

Nina passed over the contemptuous suggestion to ask dazedly: 'I have a voice? How do you know?'

'Certainly; I have heard it several times recently. You sit and sing in the evening to your baby up there on the terrace, you know. You often have quite an audience down here listening to you.'

Nina sighed. 'Esteban would hate that ——' she began.

Almost roughly Manja Gebirge caught her by the

shoulder. 'Nonsense!' she cried imperiously, 'turn the page — forget him! Of course you must go on singing. With proper training you will be the most famous of us all within five years. Come, child, pull yourself together. You are young, you are healthy. You have a voice — that will fill to the roof many an opera house of which as yet you have never even heard. You know already what life is — for most of us. Why not go out into the world and make a fortune for yourself and the boy, there?'

Said Nina slowly, 'And then Esteban might not be so ashamed of me.'

CHAPTER III

I

Curiously enough, as seems to be so often the case on these critical occasions when a human being hesitates on the chilly brink of an irrevocable decision, each circumstance of the next few hours hurried Nina relentlessly toward the point of departure she dreaded so much.

Even Esteban, completely unconscious as he was of the moving finger writing by this time so implacably on the wall of his garden of delight, and as though himself determined to push Nina Hanana beyond the possibility of a return into that new life of drama and color sketched, at the instigation of the famous impresario, Salvatore Nicolini, so seductively for her by Manja Gebirge, turned up unexpectedly from Nice in time for supper in one of his least genial moods. One look at him warned Nina that underneath his usual indifferent courtesy there smouldered an annoyed irritation. A shade guiltily she wondered if he could possibly have heard anything about the interview of the morning. Had Manja Gebirge said anything indiscreet to some friend of his mother's? Preoccupied, however, with her own troubled musings, she made no effort to talk to Esteban, remaining silent and gravely abstracted.

Sitting opposite him at the round, flower-decorated table — with its lace-edged cloth and fine silver, its handsome china and its gleaming glasses and decanters — suddenly and for the first time the girl appeared oddly remote and inaccessible to the discontented young man. The idea being a thoroughly unpleasing one to his

high-mightiness, Esteban began to watch her covertly. But, this new attitude puzzling him, he said nothing for some twenty minutes or so, continuing to eat a very excellent supper without appetite or attention. Finally, after throwing her more than one quick, inquiring look, he asked sharply:

'Ramon is not ill?'

Nina shook her head. 'He is lying asleep in his cot, like an angel. Not even flushed, to-night.'

'I am very glad,' said Esteban.

Nina looked across the rose-bowl. 'Are you getting a little fond of him?' she asked wistfully.

On very small sentences a whole essay may turn. Had Esteban admitted that he was daily growing more devoted to his little son, Manja Gebirge and her schemes might have called to Nina in vain. But, his contradictory humor uppermost, all he said was:

'He's not a bad little chap. But he'll be a devil when he grows up, no doubt.'

And Nina, sighing, felt herself as usual rebuffed.

After another silence, Esteban asked: 'Then what is the matter with you?'

Nina started — she had, in her now definite plannings, forgotten Esteban completely.

'Nothing. What do you mean?'

Esteban considered her for a moment over the wine-glass he had been holding up to the candlelight. Then he raised it to her.

'You are very lovely, Nina,' he said slowly, almost as if he had made a perfectly new discovery.

Smiling faintly, she shrugged her shoulders, which made him frown.

'It doesn't make the least difference to you now — what I think of you ——' he said crossly.

'You are behaving just like a little boy — don't be silly,' she returned.

Something in her tone, coldly cheerful and business-like, annoyed Esteban still more.

'What have you been up to to-day?' he demanded truculently, knowing that this particular method of attack always made her, sooner or later, lose her temper.

But for once she met his eye squarely and good-humoredly. 'Well,' she returned, with a hint of mischief in her tones, 'as a matter of fact, I have just been wasting another of God's good days, as I so often do now — if you really want to know.'

Said Esteban angrily: 'Do you still expect to drag me at your apron-strings every hour of the twenty-four?'

Nina made a face at him and shook her head till the diamonds in her long earrings twinkled a red and blue fire. 'No — never again, Esteban, dear. At least I have enough sense to know when a thing is dead.'

This philosophical pronouncement was so very far from what he had expected to hear that he stared at her.

'Would you mind repeating that?' he asked.

This was a Nina he had never seen before: a new Nina — more, far more, independent than the earlier one; faintly mocking, even; and certainly mistress of herself. A Nina whose great, shadowy eyes veiled for once their message; and whose face showed no trace of feeling, suddenly having become mask-like. Again, too, she seemed determined to retreat indifferently before his attack.

'It was of no importance — what I said. What did you do with yourself to-day?'

In spite of himself a trifle confused at this carrying of the skirmish into the camp of the foe, he returned: 'I — oh, nothing much. I was on José de Premijoy's yacht. He took quite a party of us for a cruise. Salvatore Nicolini — whom I detest — was there. Boasting about a wonderful new singer he has discovered.'

'Really? Any women in the party?'

'Aha, jealous?'

This was more like the old Nina — ever a little afraid of losing him.

'No,' she laughed, 'not any longer, dear Esteban.'

'You think you are so sure of me?'

'Sure of what I know ——'

'And how much is that?'

'Ah — how much, indeed?'

Again he was conscious of a new tone in her voice — a note of indifference.

She was rising, too: not waiting for him to send her out onto the terrace while he smoked his after-supper cigarette and sipped his port alone in the airy, handsome room. Uneasily he regarded her for the second time.

'Nina,' he cried quickly, 'there is something — you are different.'

Her hand on the doorknob, she turned to drop him that deep Spanish curtsy which, as she did it, was an action of such proud yet alluring grace. 'Don Esteban is pleased to jest,' she said, swept him one swift, provocative glance from under heavy lashes, and was gone.

For a short-lived moment he contemplated following

her. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he abandoned the half-hearted intention and sat back deliberately in his chair. Of what use would a half-passionate, wholly reproachful scene between the two of them be? More than ever useless now that he had allowed his mother at last to persuade him that it was inevitable that sooner or later he must alter his way of living. This kind of holiday, non-moral existence was not worthy of his youth or his talents; and could lead nowhere. It merely dragged their ancient and honorable name in the dust. And the first step toward changing the equivocal situation was to be taken within the next two weeks when he was to travel to Madrid with the Señora and be formally reconciled to his uncle. And though he had every intention of returning to Nina at the conclusion of this penitential visit, yet he was shrewd enough to recognize that some day, and one not so far distant either, from some other suddenly undertaken journey to his own land and people, he would not return. Thereafter Nina's life would pursue a course very far away from his, he feared, if it had anything to do with his resolute parent. Only too clearly, after four months of Doña Juanita's subtle maneuverings, was her son beginning to perceive that in the eyes of his relatives and friends — a large and powerful social clan — he was considered to have made, during the last two years, a prize fool of himself: a galling reflection to one as haughtily self-sufficient as Esteban Valdez. Yet, in spite of everything, still deep in his heart in love with Nina Hanana, and very unwilling to let his little son slip out of his daily life, and, further, much less resolute about it all now that he was back in his own house again than he had imagined himself to be,

he continued to sit in the large, empty room smoking cigarette after cigarette and drinking his wine sullenly.

Out on the terrace, supposing herself to be out of earshot, Nina had picked up her mandolin and was singing softly to herself one old Andalusian love-song after another. After a little while, growing careless of who heard her, she allowed the dramatic, dangerously attractive sounds to float in to the brooding Esteban. They began to form a curiously vital background to the medley of regrets, resentments, and perplexities with which he was struggling. Finally with an impatient sigh he rose, pushed back his chair, and strode out into the scent-laden night. In the shadow of a tall cypress he stopped.

Nina was sitting on a stone seat — her shawl, brilliant with embroidered flowers and birds, had been thrown across its carved back — on that terrace which at the highest point of the villa's grounds overlooked the curving bay of San Remo and the rippling moonlit sea. She was still singing, but now, quite forgetful of anything but the ballad and her rendering of it, her voice rang out — compelling and beautiful. There was a magnetism about the girl as she sat there which Esteban felt for the first time. In spite of his ill-humor and general exacerbation with life, a sudden rush of passionate admiration for her awakened in him. And as she let her voice die away on a last thrilling note, he was about to call to her when the sound of vociferous clapping from the beach below set astir all his irritability once more. It was intolerable that she should sing so complacently for perfect strangers, accepting, it would seem, their patronizing applause as a right. For now he could see, from where he watched in the shadows, that Nina did not ap-

pear at all astonished at the tribute. Nor was it displeasing to her. This thing had obviously happened before. More and more exasperated, Esteban saw her wave a friendly greeting to her unseen admirers, jumping up briskly from her seat to do so. Then, before he realized what she intended doing, to his lively disgust she broke off a rose from the rambler which covered the pergola in which she had been sitting and flung it far out over the sands below. Again there was a noise of amused laughter and ecstatic applause which drove Esteban to distraction, and a man's voice cried loudly in Italian: 'To our next meeting, Signorina, and a thousand thanks — Nightingale.'

But this homage was too much for Esteban. Wrathfully he marched down the gravelled path to her.

'Nina,' he cried harshly, 'what do you mean by making such a cheap vaudeville spectacle of yourself? Are you out of your senses, that you must go throwing flowers over walls to passers-by whose applause of your amateur efforts could only be designed to make game of you? Your singing will never command the admiration of the connoisseur. Have I not told you over and over again that, as long as you live under my roof, I wish you to behave as a well-bred woman, not a circus clown? I'm sick of your flashy actress's ways.'

As he continued to storm at her, and she turned to face him, he fancied, in the bright moonlight, that she looked panic-stricken and white as her dress. Then she pulled herself together and began to laugh.

'Don't well-bred woman ever sing on lovely nights like this in their gardens?' she asked derisively. 'Can I help it, Esteban, if people strolling on the beach below

seem to like my silly songs? I don't pretend to be a prima donna. Yet if they like my voice, and take the age-old way of expressing thanks for the entertainment, what should I do?'

She said all this so coolly, still fingering her mandolin, that at first he was quite taken aback.

'And after all, you must remember I am — a circus clown,' she ended fleeringly.

Her open indifference had the most unhappy effect on Esteban. Fled were all his gentler thoughts, his softer moments. His eyes like blue steel, his mouth set in one straight, hard line, he came and stood before the contumelious creature.

'Stop strumming,' he commanded her. 'It's time we came to some understanding.'

Nina shrugged her shoulders and let the mandolin rest against the curved end of the seat.

'Go on,' she said. 'Are you going to row me again? Really, Esteban, I am getting very tired of it.'

2

On the same night on which Nina, after that final passionate scene in the garden, full of violence and disruption, burnt her boats and left behind her at once Esteban and her girlhood forever, taking with her the placidly sleeping Ramon and little more in the way of worldly goods than she had owned when she left Ronda, Pierre Chanel found himself almost at the end of his resources. Thrust out into the world from an early age as he had been, to earn a precarious living in any way that he might manage, misfortune had dogged his steps for nearly a year past. It appeared that even in the cheap-

est orchestras they did not appreciate his methods of conducting, and, in all the world, no one wished to listen to his playing of the piano. A very discouraging attitude in the public to so ambitious a young musician as he knew himself to be. And as Nina's train swayed uncertainly, as all Continental trains seem to do, along the metals and the Mediterranean shore toward Marseilles and him, Pierre was seated disconsolately enough on a particularly hard bench on the platform of that echoing station, contemplating very ruefully his last few francs.

'But a hundred — a measly hundred,' he muttered, counting unhopefully for the fifth or sixth time the few greasy notes that remained in his possession after paying his plump and far too coquettish landlady for his final week's board and lodging in the rue Grenelle: a slatternly street tucked away in the back of the town, with not one redeeming feature about its drab houses, or shrill-voiced, scolding housewives. Again he drew the handful of coins of much too small denominations to be very helpful out of the pockets of his shabby blue serge trousers. In the bottom of his heart he cherished a fantastic notion that it was more lucky to keep copper and silver alloy apart: not that so far he had ever possessed very much to separate!

'Not a great deal of use, these,' he said, regarding them whimsically, 'to hold body and soul together till the *Bon Dieu* shall see fit to direct my steps to the securing of another job in some vile restaurant orchestra, or in some far from fashionable music-hall. And if He only knew what a pain it gives me to accompany the vulgar songs most of these *comédiennes* sing! Supposedly we

are all his children, but was it necessary to create the music-hall female warbler? —I think not. And to condemn me to an existence in which I am as dirt beneath their high-heeled shoes was too hard, when I feel so certain, if I were only given a chance, I could hold an audience of a much better class than they ever capture, with my music. Oh, *la la* — thus the world spins, though.'

He sighed heavily and shrugged his shoulders, thrusting the money roughly back into his pockets. One coin, escaping from his careless fingers, rolled away across the dingy spaces of the deserted platform. Pierre watched its erratic course interestedly. He was still young enough to be superstitious; and such trifles as the fall of a leaf or the spinning of a coin always had the power to set his imagination at work and raise his ever lightly slumbering hopes.

He laughed gayly: 'Let us now believe that this indicates that from the south and along the railroad, of all places, good Fortune is at last winging her way to me.'

He jumped up, stretched himself, yawned lustily, looked about the empty station, and swiftly retrieved his wandering franc piece.

'Also, that in the near future I may not only be earning myself some bread but some butter to spread on it — however thinly.'

His mood having in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, changed from a disconsolate hopelessness to one of alert, almost joyous anticipation, though why he could not have said, he began to walk up and down, singing in a pleasing baritone, and, as the song directs, at a good swinging pace:

'En passant par la Lorraine,
Avec mes sabots,
En passant par la Lorraine,
Avec mes sabots,
Rencontrai trois capitaines,
Avec mes sabots —'

He trolled out the '*Dondaine, oh, oh, oh, avec mes sabots,*' of the chorus with so much energy that any near-by sleeper must at least have stirred in his sleep, and passed on to those subsequent verses of the ballad which relate tersely enough the insult hurled at the young lady's head by the three soldiers, as also her spirited rejoinder thereto. The less certain avowal that her future happiness and position turn on a '*bouquet de marjolaine —S'il fleurit je serai reine; S'il meurt je perds ma peine,*' Pierre, like the artist that he undoubtedly was, gave more softly to the sleeping world. In the clear mounting light of dawn his tall figure and his finely shaped head began to stand out against the dingy mass that was the station building. A breeze commencing to stir, he took off his ancient felt hat, now almost shapeless from much ill-treatment, breathed deep breaths of the morning air into his lungs, and finished up with so vigorous a shaking of his head that all his thick dark hair ended by tumbling untidily about his high forehead.

Signs of vague life by this time had begun to be apparent in the station. A sleepy blue-bloused porter or two showed up suddenly — a gold-laced official became visible. A few passengers, doubtless bound for Paris like himself, emerged, tousled and yawning, from the dank harbor of the waiting-room. Down the line a signal moved — lights changed quickly along the track.

'Very certainly,' said Pierre, 'the train approacheth

that is to take me to the banks of the Seine once more. And time, too, though much *la ville lumière* will care.'

With a great noise of whistling, a straining of axles and gears, a grinding of steel, the dark line of coaches slid into view, passed along the platform and came to a standstill. It seemed that all on board still slept. But now, in contrast to the earlier calm, all about the station was bustle and noise. Voices called loudly, luggage was hurled on and off the baggage cars, some people actually left the train and grumblingly with boxes and portmanteaus retired into Marseilles, to rattle over cobblestones and find hotels in which to finish less uncomfortably their night's rest. Here and there on the train, too, blinds were drawn a few inches to permit faces to peer curiously out at the scene of industrious activity. Especially was this so in the less expensive carriages to which Pierre, his valise in his hand, now nimbly directed his steps.

Entering a coach near the end of the night express from Italy, he sauntered along the second-class corridor. He had not been able to bring himself to travel third; which, on account of the state of his finances, he certainly should have done. Into first one and then another of the compartments he peered uncertainly. Every place seemed full of sleepers and baggage and snores, uninviting to the last degree.

'I was never intended to be a poor man,' reflected Pierre. 'All my tastes are those of the idle rich. Few people prize the amenities of life as I do.'

At last, quite at the end of the narrow passage, he found an almost empty compartment. But one traveler leant sleepily in his or her corner. In the dim shaded

light he could hardly see, then. A huge and thick cloak covered the traveler. Thankfully Pierre dived in, for he had not relished remaining in the corridor, uncertainly perched upon a *strapontin* till the next stop might endow him with a seat. He thrust his valise into the empty rack above his head, and was about to ensconce himself comfortably in the corner seat by the door when his eye fell on the baby lying asleep on the cushions opposite him. His face must have been eloquent of his disgusted dismay — for of all things Pierre feared and disliked babies, always squalling or kicking as he had found the genus in the rue Grenelle — because the amorphous, bundled-up figure in the seat beside it began to laugh. She had a very delightful spontaneous laugh, too.

Uncertainly Pierre glanced across at her. He wondered what the laugh meant — exactly. She must be young, then — her amusement had been too fresh and musical not to be. But could she only be entertained at his attitude of craven misgiving? Might she not be offended, as well? Mothers of small infants, he knew, took a strange pride in the unaccountable performances of their brats, no matter how much these incommoded other folk.

Considerably astonished that she could laugh at all after the devastating experiences of the last few hours, Nina said reassuringly to this personable young man who was so obviously intimidated by the sight of a baby: 'He won't be a nuisance. He's very quiet, even dignified already. And he sleeps most of the time, I assure you. So you needn't plunge away recklessly in a panic and hunt yourself a much less comfortable corner in the train — unless you really want to.'

Pierre found her voice increasingly attractive, so much so that he began to wish energetically she were not so enveloped in the heavy, dark cloak, with its great hood in which her head was so completely enshrouded that he could not gain even the slightest glimpse of her features. He found himself speculating as to whether she could be as youthful as her voice sounded or — well, not so young. She was probably some very ordinary little *bourgeoise*, after all. Suddenly across his errant thoughts flitted pleasantly the recollection of his wandering franc. From the south — and by the railroad. Well, one never knew. *Vive la chance!*

'Madame must pardon my rudeness,' he apologized, 'but my luck has not been very good with small children of late. Indeed, to be honest, life on all sides has handed me the rottenest of cards with which to play the game of existence for a long time past.'

'I regret that very much for you, monsieur,' returned Nina civilly, but made it quite clear that she was in no mood for light talk at that hour in the morning.

Disappointedly Pierre sank back in his seat. By nature he was a gregarious soul and loved conversation. The hour of the day or night made not a jot of difference to him.

The train continued to rush feverishly through France. In Nina's mind one picture after another of her life with Esteban rose mercilessly to confront her and render her heart always more sore. Unforgettable days of deep happiness — less contented ones — hours upon hours of misery, then recriminations, arguments, unjust accusations, resentments — tears, always, latterly, tears. Yet with it all she knew her heart still to

belong to Esteban. No good thinking of that now, of course. She had left him — of her own free will. She, too, had her pride — she would never go back. Tears again began to gather — to fall.

'I'm just sick of crying,' said Nina violently, quite unaware that she had spoken aloud.

In his roving, theatrical life, having painfully acquired some knowledge of the feminine character, for he was at heart an idealist, Pierre decided to say nothing. And the train ran on for at least another dozen miles before Nina spoke again. Then she pushed back her hood, turned to the window, and let the blind up with a rattle, observing, to no one in particular:

'It's another lovely day.'

'Madame speaks the blessed truth,' said Pierre to the back of her head, and busied himself in pulling up the other blinds and letting all the air and sunlight possible into their carriage, after the stuffy twilight of the night hours. That done, he looked at Nina for the first time. By now Ramon had awakened and she had the little fellow in her arms, laughing ecstatically at her cooing. The picture the two made Pierre never forgot — though he was to watch her all through her most successful years — a glittering star of the first magnitude. But here and now, in the swaying train, wearing a cheap dark frock, the terrible cloak all about her, with the early sunlight upon them both — the creatures were so austerely beautiful and so remote — it hurt.

'By Saint Joseph, a madonna — no less,' he reflected, a trifle giddy from his private viewing of so much loveliness. We must remember he was always a susceptible and romantic being until he got a *bâton* in his hand,

when he instantly turned pure martinet and a wizard with his orchestra. 'Who could have had the heart to make her cry?' rushed into his perturbed brain. Though later he was to learn unhappily that his idol could wring the heart of a poor fool. But in order to make her speak to him less frostily than she had done earlier, 'How old is your baby?' he asked foxily.

Nina, to his delight, fell for the rather obvious maneuver at once.

'Four months — but he's a big boy. And terribly healthy. And, all the same, mother's treasure.' With that she began to tickle Ramon and toss him about till that young statesman gurgled and laughed loudly, trying to catch at her with his small, warm paws. 'You see all babies are not always screaming,' she added as, flushed and smiling, she brought the entrancing game to an end.

'Few babies are like yours, I should say,' politely returned Pierre, but his eyes were already adoring her in their brown depths.

'You flatter my angel Ramon just as Manja Gebirge does,' she said.

The mention of so celebrated a musical personage made Pierre's heart almost skip a beat.

'You know that eccentric prima donna with the stentorian voice but heart of gold?' he could not resist asking.

Nina nodded carelessly. 'But not so well as I shall know her later, perhaps.'

It seemed that he was to be permitted to continue the conversation with this lovely, indifferent goddess. How came she to be traveling alone? And who could she be?

Said Pierre, 'Perhaps Madame sings?'

Madame over her baby's head made a face. 'Oh, yes, I sing. Gypsy songs, and the like. Nothing classic, believe me, Monsieur. But they will have it that some day I shall sing in opera.' She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. 'The dear knows — that's why I'm on my way to Paris this morning.'

'To find out ——' ventured Pierre.

'Yes,' said Nina; 'and I suppose it will be very expensive.'

'Madame intends to train to be a *diva*, then?'

Nina nodded. 'I have no choice. They all tell me I'd be a fool not to. Have you ever heard of a man called Nicolini?'

Pierre found himself becoming momentarily more impressed. These were names to conjure with. Musically Nicolini was a giant who bestrode, in those days, the world of song, having managed for the past twenty years the fortunes of more great stars than probably he cared to count. He held Covent Garden in his pocket and most of the metropolitan opera houses of the world in his hands. Backed by him, a singer had an entrée everywhere.

'Indeed, yes. Who has not heard of Salvatore Nicolini?'

His tone was so respectful that Nina, biting softly her son's right hand, laughed. 'I had not,' she confessed. 'When Manja Gebirge introduced him to me, he meant just nothing to me. I only thought what a vast black beard he possessed and what twinkling eyes. But Ramon took a great fancy to him. However, I suppose I am just an ignoramus,' and she sighed.

'Madame may not have moved in musical circles,' suggested Pierre comfortingly.

Whereupon Nina opened her eyes very widely, gave him the first confidential look of that journey, and remarked: 'Believe me, I've never had the chance to move, as you call it, in any circles. Before this one came' — she kissed Ramon lightly on the fluffy top of his head — 'I was shut away for months in a villa. Oh, a very beautiful place, with a heavenly garden, but there were high walls all round it. It seems funny to think,' she added, more to herself than the eagerly listening Pierre, 'that only four summers ago I belonged to Malida's troupe. Have you ever heard of Malida?' she asked him.

'Would that be Malida's Celebrated Combination of Acrobats, Jugglers, and Wrestlers?'

'That's it!' cried Nina.

'But I cannot believe that Madame ——'

Her laugh rang out again, this time unaffectedly gay.

'But I was — and not so important, either. I danced, and dressed the stage for Rodriguez, and made myself generally useful: and looked after the twins out of working hours.'

Pierre was more intrigued than ever.

'The twins?' he demanded. 'Do you mean Manuel and Miguel?'

'Yes. They must be getting quite big fellows by now — going on for twelve. But even then every one treated them as if they were old men.'

'But I know them all! Malida, a big brute, and Rodriguez, who was getting a bit too fat' — almost shouted Pierre excitedly. 'I was on the same bill with

them — let me see, about three or four years ago. I was doing better than I am now. They were in Berlin then. They had just come from Madrid ——'

The mention of this city, however, did not have a happy effect on Nina, whose gayer mood now almost totally vanished.

Frowningly she said, 'I should have gone to Madrid — only ——'

As she fell silent, Pierre said consolingly, 'There are so many things we ought to do in life and don't — especially we of the theater.'

Nina turned her attention on him. 'What do you do?' she asked.

Pierre indulged in one of those typically French gestures which are so informing in themselves. 'I — I am a composer, but far too modern for them, a *chef d'orchestre* when any one will trust me with a few musicians, a player of the piano — in fact, a jack-of-all-trades. But mostly it is my lot to accompany terrible, fat, and jeweled music-hall favorites, when they shout to their enthusiastic public songs of more than dubious taste. They jump on me like a cartload of bricks if I forget them once in a while looking at some pretty *cocotte* in a box and play too loud. In fact, it's a hell of a life for a poor young man who wants to do good work, if you will forgive my putting it thus bluntly.'

'I am quite used to men who swear,' said Nina. 'To hear you talk reminds me of old times.'

'But what can one do when one has no money and only a driving ambition for adviser and companion?'

'You have no family, then?' asked Nina.

Pierre smiled gently. 'I had a grandmother — but

she went to heaven, finding the ways of this world too strange and hard for her. All she left me was an excellent constitution, which skipped my immediate progenitors, and some musical talent, I fondly imagine. In her day she was a well-known pianist. But life, Madame, is damned hard for most of us who do not run with the herd, and sell ribbons over the counter, or food, let us say.'

'Life's a very queer thing,' said Nina. 'Isn't it odd you should know Rodriguez? Once I was very afraid of him — but I have not seen him for a long time now. Are you superstitious?' she ended abruptly.

Her words brought his wandering franc again back to his mind. From the south, and along the railroad. Wasn't that what he had decided? And now let his grandmother look down from heaven and regard him. Was he superstitious? Yes, indeed.

'*Mon Dieu!* I should say I was!' he cried.

'And so am I,' returned Nina. 'At least I think I am — for whenever I look at my golden horseshoe ——'

'A golden horseshoe?' Pierre was all attention, and Nina, finding him so enthralled a listener, though she had not at first intended to confide in him so far, finished by telling him all about the finding of it.

'And before I knew it, my old life had fallen away and everything had changed for me. Since that day,' she ended, 'I have taken it wherever I traveled. But the odd thing is — I may forget it for months, yet as surely as I take it out of its box, for no matter what reason, something important happens directly afterward. Things seem to alter completely for me.'

'Always for the better?'

'I shouldn't like to say that exactly — they change and quite suddenly. I looked at it by chance a few days ago — and now I am on my way to Paris. The last place I ever dreamt of coming to.'

'And I have a franc, too,' said Pierre.

Through the morning hours they chattered inconsequently and happily, Nina, always able to throw herself into the interest of the moment, thrusting the thought of Esteban determinedly into the background. Thus unknowingly she and Pierre started a friendship that death alone was to end.

When she took Ramon to the little washroom next door to make his toilette and feed him, Pierre went foraging through the train for a breakfast for them both. Never mind that he had only one hundred francs. When she returned, there were coffee and rolls and fruit set out on a little table.

'But how good of you!' said Nina. 'I didn't know how hungry I was till just this moment.'

Before they had arrived at the Gare de Lyon, Pierre was in possession of all Nina's perplexities. It seemed that she had not been in France for some years and hardly knew where to take herself and Ramon.

'It must be five years since I was here last. I was a lanky girl then. Rodriguez used to say I looked exactly like a beanpole when I danced — but what can you expect of fifteen? I had at least no responsibilities of any kind. I went wherever the troupe went — it was some little old house in Montmartre. But to-day ——'

She sighed, and looked so worried that Pierre, loath to lose sight of her for one moment, now he had found the golden girl of his dreams, but not yet aware that Nina

would never have her heart in her own keeping again, asked her eagerly: 'Would you allow me to advise you?'

Nina was very grateful. 'Why, yes — if you would be so kind. I am all alone with Ramon. You see I left Italy' — he noticed she did not say from what part she had come, and this was the Rome express — she might have stepped on the train at any of a dozen stations — 'much sooner than Manja Gebirge suggested as wise. But it was impossible for me to remain any longer where I was ——'

Her eyes grew dark with a pain that even Pierre could feel, so tragic did she suddenly appear to him.

'Who could have made her so wretched?' he wondered savagely.

Then she continued resolutely, 'In August, Nicolini will find me a teacher — and I am to work hard for two years at least.'

'Will you let me help you?' Impulsively risking the setback it might so easily cause him, he took the further step and held out his hand.

Nina, after endowing him with one long, steady look, put her hand in his. 'Yes,' she said simply.

After that he became brotherly and voluble; told her of the little hotel he stayed at always, tucked away in one of the narrow streets running behind the Magasin du Louvre.

'As cheap as it can be — but clean, *mon Dieu!* And as respectable. We could get you an airy room at the top of the house that catches all the sunlight possible for the baby ——'

By the afternoon she and Ramon were comfortably settled in a high room overlooking the courtyard of

Pierre's hostelry. And already, from Madame down, every woman in the place had succumbed to the composed young hidalgo — Ramon de Segovia, as from that day for many years he was to be called. And though Nina, singing him to sleep in the window, and watching idly the busy life of the street six stories below, could not then perceive how she could ever find life tolerable again, let alone interesting, without Esteban, yet, before August was halfway through, healthy and young, and with Pierre to turn to in any difficulty, and rapidly becoming for the first time in her life ambitious to succeed in the career Nicolini felt so sure was hers, she found herself enjoying the days again. In fact, before long she was up to her eyes in a life that years after she looked back on with nothing but satisfaction. It had always been so cheerful and stimulating. Poor she might have been, dependent, which she did not altogether relish, on Nicolini's monthly check, but as he assured her he intended in the future to repay himself well for any help he might now afford her, she did not bother her head much about her obligation. Why should she, with her voice improving daily, all Paris for her playground, and Ramon growing more remarkable with every hour?

3

In the early summer of 1912 — to be exact, the end of May — Salvatore Nicolini, after a long absence from that attractive city, arrived in Paris, having just concluded a very trying, not to say disappointing, South American tour. Indubitably managing a star whose lyric soprano is not in its first bloom and who in consequence has ceased to gather in fresh laurels and must

now exist on those she has already accumulated, has its far from cheering aspects. Especially where the song-stress is spoilt, exacting, passionate, and bad-tempered, and invariably at odds with the tenor, however young and, at the instant, unassuming.

In no very good temper, having made no very great financial gains, and feeling uncommonly jaded, Signor Nicolini reached at last his hotel — a quiet but expensive affair in a street leading out of the avenue des Champs Élysées — and sat himself down for a couple of days therein, to rest and recuperate before he advised any one of his numerous friends or acquaintance of his arrival. His *diva*, in a last emotional scene on board the ocean liner just before it docked at Havre, he had washed his hands of — forever. And this time, though she was not yet aware of it, he meant every word he had uttered. That madly irritating woman off his mind, he debated other points. For the first time in some years he had leisure to take stock of his present position. And that which he reflected on — he did not like. In the first place, his travels had barely compensated him for their expense, a conclusion he had not had to contemplate for more years than he liked to count. In the second place, his greatest rival, though a much younger man, in the agitating business of being an *impresario*, Bojer Nordstrom, had not only just launched on a wildly enthusiastic world the finest violinist of the day, Carlo Leone, with which pyrotechnical wizard, he was having a phenomenal success, but had also had the good luck to discover in some out-of-the-way place in Italy a new conductor — one Petroni. This musical genius he was about to introduce to the symphony

audiences of the New World during the coming fall. Now Signor Nicolini had been discreetly on the lookout for just such talent — new and easy to manage — for at least two years, and to have missed acquiring these musical jewels was more than he could at the moment bear.

'I need something young and fresh — or I shall be amongst the has-beens before I know where I am. I'm frightfully tired of dry-nursing temperamental and spoilt children of song who have had their day, and without knowing it are back numbers,' he reflected cynically, as he lay in a *chaise longue* just inside the widely opened windows of his luxurious sitting-room and listened to the rollicking hum of Paris beneath him. 'I almost believe I'll retire from the business — which is nerve-racking. Bojer needs all he can get — he has an expensive wife and a couple of babies — whereas I'm a widower of long standing and have only myself to think of. I'm certainly not as young as I was. And I've made enough money to be very comfortable for the rest of my life. Good, solid investments. Why sweat and toil and fardels bear any longer?'

He stretched out his hand, helped himself to a cigar from the stand by his side, and, lighting it, began to smoke with enjoyment.

'Yes, let other and younger men — Bojer Nordstrom, for instance — take up the burden of piloting all musical talent in the future to the hall of fame. I've had enough of it. What does it amount to for me, after all? Nothing but the hardest and most thankless of tasks. Who thinks of me when they applaud my artists? No one. Most people have never even heard of me. I'm tired of being the power behind the spotlight.'

His long nervous fingers stroked his bushy black beard, in which a few silver hairs shone, and he sighed lightly — for the days that were no more. At fifty-six he knew himself to be a very tired man, yet he also knew, very well, that if he could once acquire some new interest in the theatrical or musical game, he would be playing it as ardently again as he had at any time in the last twenty-odd years, his musical ventures going back as they did to the days of bustles and Queen Victoria's first Jubilee.

'The fact is, I've been out of Europe too long. I'm as dusty as an old monument. Instead of mooning, I'd far better buck up — and look round. If one makes money the other side of the Atlantic, most of the talent is raised this side. There must be some youngster somewhere worth launching.' He sighed again. 'If I could only get up some enthusiasm!' That was it — he felt he had lost all energy, all *brio*, as it were. All voices to-day seemed alike — mediocre. Badly trained and conceited young things rushed to get a hearing instead of patiently perfecting their art first. The new aspirants were not as the old had been: of far inferior quality. The art of '*bel canto*' seemed to be disappearing. All musicians, too, as far as he could judge, were flat, stale, and unprofitable. Yes, that was the worst of it — distinctly unprofitable. Then, with a quick revulsion of feeling, he wondered if this attitude in him was merely a sign of age. He decided finally to spend the next day in a Turkish bath. He would go to the Hammam in the rue des Mathurins and rush fifteen francs. Well, that wouldn't make him or break him.

The following evening, feeling much rested and re-

freshed, he decided to call up Manja Gebirge. He hadn't heard anything of her for ages. That mountainous but good-natured Teuton he found was on the point of leaving for London, where she had promised to sandwich in a couple of recitals between four performances of Elsa in 'Lohengrin,' at Covent Garden. She would be gone for the whole month of June. She announced also that she had no place in which to leave her Angora cat, who was now, like herself, getting on in years, while away, as she expressed it, 'earning him liver and catnip.' She intended giving her *bonne-à-tout-faire*, Julie, a holiday, and meant to take her maid, Céleste, with her to the land of fogs. Therefore her *appartement* would be shut up.

'Are you going to be in Paris long, Salvatore?' she ended.

'A month or so.'

'Then I suppose you wouldn't feel like giving Clovis a home for four short weeks ——'

Salvatore was perfectly certain that he had no urge that way.

'A pity,' Manja Gebirge sighed gustily down the telephone. 'You'd find him a very easy-going guest, believe me. The animal has perfect manners.'

Doubting it, seeing that the beast had been trained by Manja, who never had possessed any — at any time — Signor Nicolini changed the subject with great firmness.

'It's a lovely evening — why don't you come and dine with me somewhere? Prunier's — or perhaps Voisin; where you can have your *pommes de terres Anna*, and I can enjoy some excellent wine?'

But it seemed Madame Gebirge was far too busy.

'Don't you realize, you foolish man, I cross that

swaying Channel the day after to-morrow? *Herr Gott!* my old friend, I have every moment occupied till I catch, or do not catch — which is more likely as far as I can see now — the boat train at the Nord.'

He was in the middle of expressing his regrets that she would not come with him and wishing her much success on her English visit when she broke into his well-turned phrases with a brusque 'How about that young Spanish girl — Nina Hanana? When do you bring her out, Nicolini?'

Salvatore nearly dropped the receiver. Nina Hanana — she had completely passed out of his mind. It was at least a couple of years since he had thought of her, though he supposed every month his bank had punctually sent her his check for one thousand francs. By now she must be owing him a good deal — something near thirty-six thousand francs. Pessimistically regarding the world and all its works as he was at the moment, he began to wonder just how much of a fool he had been to be caught by a pretty face, seen only at a distance after all, a voice — certainly there had been a voice, but totally untrained — and influenced so strongly by a sudden dislike he had taken to a fellow he had met only once or twice on that scatter-brain José de Premijoy's yacht. Where was José now, he wondered. It must be all of three years since he had set eyes on that conceited, repressive young snob, Esteban Valdez. He had to chuckle when he remembered how he, a complete stranger, had managed to upset the private apple-cart of that young patrician.

'Nina Hanana!' he repeated. 'I had forgotten all about her.'

There was a great laugh at the other end of the wire. 'Yes — Nina Hanana,' returned Manja's strident speaking voice with its guttural French accent. 'It's time you did something about her, Salvatore, my old one, or you'll be in great danger of losing altogether something one doesn't pick up every day. Pebbles are much commoner than precious stones, my musical friend, as who should know better than you?'

'I take it all this eloquence means — she can sing.'

Another loud laugh reached him. Then the tremendous voice shouted: 'Sing! Go and hear her for yourself.' And Manja rang off. She had long learned the value of a good dramatic curtain.

It was this cryptic conversation which sent the Signor Nicolini first of all to his bank next day for information as to what the girl did owe him and where she was to be found. To his great astonishment he was informed that for the past twelve months, at her request, the Señorita's allowance had been discontinued. In all, however, she was in his debt some twenty thousand francs.

Speculating on what she could have been doing for the past year to earn her own living, after lunch he took a taxi and, crossing to the left bank of the Seine, was driven up the boulevard Raspail till he reached the rue Boissonnade.

CHAPTER IV

I

It was a quarter of the city in which he had not set foot for many years. In fact, not since the day when, in a fit of mad impatience with himself as an artist, he had decided he had far better cease ineffectually daubing canvases with paint, in a forlorn endeavor to depict subjects nobody wanted to buy in those now far-away eighties, when he was twenty-odd, and France had barely recovered from the rough usage accorded her by her foes after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870: the housewives of Paris still vividly remembering the Siege and being in consequence apt to take every fair-mustached and blue-eyed foreigner for a detested Teuton. He recollected how, a prey to the deepest despondency, he had fled hotfoot back to Rome and his parents' great, grandiose house for helpful advice. But these, being sturdy and energetic citizens, with not so far behind them an Hebraic ancestry, whose overlord was certainly Business, received him with so great an outburst of hearty derision at such distrust of his powers as the hurried vacating of the artistic field implied, as quite to overwhelm him.

'What kind of a faint poor heart can you be? If you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will. Determination and hard work and not too much conscience, that's what does the trick. And, above all, not letting any one get the start of you.'

This was the text on which they hung endless oratori-

cal efforts till Salvatore daily ate the bread of dejection and bitterness. Finally his father, the stout head of an international music-publishing firm — it was singular to realize that to-day he stood in the old man's shoes and had done for many years — had literally taken him by the shoulders and shoved him forcibly into the business of managing musical prodigies of all kinds, ages, and nationalities.

'If you can't be a star yourself — whether in paint, verse, or song, or any kind of instrument — at least learn how to make money out of those who can. That way you won't end in the gutter, at any rate,' his cynical parent had said.

And so, not caring much what he did then, he had drifted into being one of the most successful *impresarios* of his day. But all this heart-searching and distress of soul was a very long time ago. For years he had never even thought of that unhappy period. Strange how one could relive old emotions in a few minutes. Driving up the Raspail in the afternoon sunshine had brought it all back. The place hadn't changed much. He saw, as he got out of the taxi and paid the man, that the rue Boissonnade was still a regular painters' and sculptors' street. The old careless atmosphere a shade down at heel he remembered so well was yet in evidence, though the elderly houses in the bright sunlight looked more weather-beaten than they were in his day. But open windows and flowers in pots just inside, or on the sill, abounded as of yore. And voices called cheerfully to other unseen inhabitants within their walls. Somewhere a boy whistled a popular song.

After a moment he rang the concierge's bell of the

house to which he had been directed to come by his bank in quest of Nina Hanana, though the manager had tactfully ventured to remind him Madame de Segovia was the name she always used now: had indeed done so, as far as he knew, for the past three years. Discreet questioning elicited the information that she was supposed to be a young widow in the neighborhood in which she now lived. But as to her resources he could tell Signor Nicolini nothing — he knew less than nothing of her circumstances.

When the door was opened in that mysterious, impersonal way in which Paris as well as New York so often welcomes the visitor, Salvatore Nicolini found himself in a long flagged passage that apparently led directly into a square courtyard in which the working studio of some probably famous sculptor who took pupils faced him through the widely flung glass doors at its farther end. From the open windows of the building a steady stream of animated chatter and persiflage proceeded. From past experience Nicolini surmised the great man must be absent and not too much work was therefore being accomplished. Well, the afternoon was hot enough in all conscience. And youth loves to talk, for the most part condemning what the previous generation decided was valuable or enduring.

Stifling a sigh for days long vanished when he made one of just such another flippant assembly, he turned toward the concierge's room, which was at the rear of the main building. A fat good-natured woman, busily knitting a shawl, was sitting by a table in the window, where flowers on the ledge and a bird in a cage brightened the prospect.

'Good-afternoon, M'sieu,' she greeted him civilly, glancing across at him with a pair of shrewd gray eyes; 'you are looking for some one in this house?'

Salvatore informed her he had been told Nina de Segovia lived there.

She smiled encouragingly over her knitting needles.

'On the top floor — up four flights of stairs — the back of the house. M'sieu cannot mistake it. The door has a small brass horseshoe on it for knocker. M'sieu Pierre insisted on nailing it up. And M'sieu is fortunate, too. As it happens, Madame is in this lovely afternoon. Generally, at this hour she is out with her little boy — he loves the gardens of the Luxembourg. Already he is *un vrai Parisien*, though he is but four years old. *Mais celui-ci*, he is a fine little fellow, at times as wise as some old owl.'

'Ah,' returned Salvatore, who possessed that rare gift of seeming interested in the conversation of no matter whom, 'the little man was but a baby — barely four months old — when I set eyes on him last.'

'M'sieu will notice a great change,' nodded the concierge.

Perceiving that he had to do with a friendly soul, Salvatore ventured on an innocuous 'And Madame — she is well?'

'But the life and spirit of everything about here,' was the prompt reply. 'M'sieu should hear her sing ——' Upturned eyes and hands completed the sentence.

'Yes?' said Nicolini.

'Such a voice! Finer than Madame Gebirge's herself. And the Saints and all Paris know well how great an artist she is.'

'And that's not to be contradicted,' he agreed warmly, 'in a long day's journey.'

The concierge continued with a laugh: 'I have often wasted much time listening to Madame Nina — her trill alone is heaven-sent — when I should have been working. But, *mon Dieu*, life cannot consist of nothing but the making of beds and sweeping of floors — one must enjoy some relaxation.'

'*Ce n'est que la vérité*, Madame,' thus Nicolini sagely; and, leaving a couple of francs on the chest of drawers next the door by which he had been standing, he took his leave and himself upstairs, followed by a brisk '*Merci, M'sieu*, and good-afternoon. *Bonne chance.*'

Up four flights as he had been directed he went steadily: past doors that were inhospitably shut, but more that were open, disclosing the go-as-you-please *ménage* of the artist, besides one or two that obviously belonged to less Bohemian owners.

On the top landing he halted to get his breath as well as take his bearings. There, facing him, was the door he looked for. A small, much polished brass horseshoe was affixed to its upper panels for knocker, as the woman downstairs had said. But who in thunder was the Monsieur Pierre who seemed so officiously at home in Nina Hanâna's life? Some ne'er-do-well, aspiring student, he supposed. He certainly would have to get himself out of the way.

Looking more closely, Salvatore saw there was also a bell-pull. But as the door had been left carelessly ajar by some one, Salvatore was much tempted to walk in on Nina without ceremony. The sound of several male voices proceeding from a room within alone deterred

him. Nicolini raised his eyebrows, a curious jealousy suddenly invading him. For a young widow she appeared foolishly unconventional, entirely too free. Then he laughed. What was he disturbing himself about? Nina Hanana had not exactly lived the life of a nun before he met her —— And if she was going to sing ——

Then he heard a child's delightful, gurgling laughter, and immediately after some one began to play the *Habanera* with the certainty of a master on an exceedingly good piano, tuned to concert pitch, he would swear. A moment later he was listening enraptured to those round full tones of hers — caressing, alluring, indifferent, provocative — which all Europe was so soon to applaud.

'*Dio!*' he muttered eagerly. 'Here is my new star — without doubt. Remains only to settle where she shall make her début. I can see a big fortune for us both for the taking. She will do well to round off my career. When she is properly launched, I shall certainly retire.'

His busy commercial brain began to spin its webs of intention and enterprise again. Let young Bojer have his Leone and his Petroni — he would need them. One De Segovia — what rare luck she had hit on so operatic a name — would be worth a baker's dozen of more ordinary fry; let 'em fiddle and compose till the Seine ran dry. By Heaven! Manja had been indeed right. Amazing woman! The only singer he had ever known who was not mortally jealous of all the others, with a heart to match her big voice, her large feet, and vast waist. 'Go and hear her sing!' — that was her advice the minute he had rung her up, almost. Well, he had ——. Nina

Hanana all unknowing of her audience, too. Again what a piece of good fortune. No nervousness there, to flatten and destroy her effects, no straining to please — above all, not one atom of uncertainty. The amazing sureness of her attack — wonderful. Every note as true and golden — the ideal Carmen, in short — profoundly heartless, wickedly sure of her self and her charm, with just that touch of tragic destiny about her only the greatest ever seemed to compass. By all the gods, for the third time, what a piece of luck! His eyes fell on the horseshoe. Might be something in it — who knew? Smiling broadly, he remained there listening, listening.

'Can she be playing that piano as well? But that would be a sheer waste of genius. Let us hope it is some man in there. How perfectly he accompanies her — one would say a labor of love. One might use him, perhaps.'

Nicolini waited patiently till the last mocking note had quite died away and the pianist had started on an absurd little waltz theme, to which several voices hummed an accompaniment; then he rang the tinkling bell boldly.

The noise of small pattering feet along the wooden floor inside came closer, stopped, the door opened slowly more widely, and Nicolini found himself gazing down at a little boy whose gravity did not relax the least bit even when he turned on him his most genial smile.

Perceiving that he had to do with a stranger, the child called over his shoulder: 'It is not Lucie, it is a man, Nina,' in an adorably clear, flutelike little voice.

Scarcely out of babyhood as he was, his air was so

self-assured that Salvatore, regarding him narrowly, had to chuckle at so much *aplomb* in anything so frail and young. Not that the baby was anything but well grown: firm of flesh and rosy of cheek. Indeed, he was unusually handsome and in miniature the image of Esteban Valdez.

So this was Nina's son — who should have been the heir to immense estates and a high destiny in Spain. As it was — Salvatore, who, like Manja, hated waste of any kind, whether in talent or place, found himself to his astonishment growing quite distressed at the thought that this sturdy little chap must grow up in the exotic, overstuffed, tumultuous, emotional world of a celebrated singer. Already he knew Nina would be that. What chance would her child have of becoming a normal, sensible young man? Inevitably he would get dragged all over the world at her heels, like some little lapdog, and inevitably he would grow spoilt, insolent, self-indulgent — worthless. A thousand pities!

By this time, however, and consequent on his unexpected announcement, the air had become clamorous with a loud din of amused masculine voices coming from the room at the end of the passage, whence the notes of the piano still sounded softly in the odd little waltz, all giving more or less jocose advice to the child. Lucie — Salvatore gathered — was the servant. Then Nina's well-remembered tones called lazily, caressingly: 'But Ramon, *lucero de mi alma*, ask the gentleman to come in.'

Evidently taking this to mean that he might become friendly with the bearded giant in the top hat, whose eyes twinkled so seductively, and who he fancied might

turn out to be a very good playfellow if given a chance, Ramon held out his hand.

'M'sieu — please come in,' he said, and smiled.

Thought Salvatore: 'If he has his father's face, he has his mother's smile — one could never forget it.'

And, taking the confiding little fingers in his own big paw, he marched with him into Nina's sitting-room. The room, though fairly large, certainly high and very airy, with little furniture in it beyond the piano, some armchairs, a couple of cheap rugs on the polished floor, and a large round table overflowing with books, a great mass of red roses in a deep blue bowl, and a pile of music, seemed crowded as he entered it.

At first he did not see Nina sitting in the armchair by the window. The piano was in the way. Then he caught sight of her rose-colored dress — made of some summer fabric, with a purple ribbon at the waist — and her beautiful head against the deep yellow of the heavy Chinese silk curtain. In her ears sparkled the elaborate diamond earrings Esteban had made his first present to her; though Salvatore did not know that till much later.

She looked up as he came to a halt, laughing, began to apologize for the informality of his reception, suddenly recognized him, then jumped to her feet and held out both her hands.

'Why, if it is not Signor Nicolini — and after all these years! Be very welcome, dear sir.' And she dropped him the prettiest curtsy. In those days there were still occasions when women dared to be charming, and even unselfconsciously ceremonious.

Nicolini came up to her, and, taking both her hands in his, kissed them.

'It is a pleasure to which I have long looked forward,' he lied easily. 'But, alas, in my business — one has to run all over the earth.'

Nina laughed and, waving him to a chair close by hers, reseated herself.

'So long,' she said, 'that I had begun to imagine some one must have been sending you bad accounts of my voice and you did not know, being kind-hearted, how you would break it to me that I never could be any good to you — even in an opera chorus.'

A general and shocked cry of 'Nina!' rose simultaneously from the rest of the inhabitants. Salvatore from his armchair looked curiously at them.

Sitting at the piano, still fingering the keys and weaving thereby oddly attractive little snatches of melody which seemed to emphasize the atmosphere of the place, a tall young man, with a head of thick brown hair and very deeply set brown eyes, remained smiling, apparently, at his own thoughts. For he certainly was not taking much notice of any one in the room.

On the floor two lads of perhaps fifteen or thereabouts sprawled over a collection of child's toys. Ramon had already gone to sit by them on his little haunches. They were all breathlessly building a lofty edifice with colored bricks.

Nina looked at Salvatore. 'I must present all these people to you,' she said, and started by calling to the young man at the piano. 'This is Pierre Chanel,' she continued as he came over to her, and, reaching up her hand, she patted him on the arm. 'He's the best friend I ever had — an excellent musician — makes me work like a dog at my scales and *arpeggi* — my trill he doesn't

worry about so much — and, finally, he is a most severe guardian to us all. Even to Manuel and Miguel there, who used to obey me once on a time — when they felt like it.'

Salvatore, regarding the young man quizzically, felt there might be a good deal of truth in what she said. He held out his hand, which Pierre Chanel shook warmly. 'At least you play very well,' he said. 'I must certainly hear more of your music, Monsieur.'

'Without him I should be lost,' said Nina.

Nicolini nodded at the two boys on the floor.

'Don't get up,' he said. 'Delighted to meet you. What do you do? Anything — yet?'

Said both in the same breath: 'We belong to Malida's Celebrated Combination of Acrobats, Jugglers, and Wrestlers ——'

'Talented young gentlemen,' said Salvatore.

'I fink I shall be 'n acrobat when I get big,' murmured Ramon, still brick-building busily.

'You could do a great deal worse,' remarked Manuel casually, handing him a last brick with which to crown the imposing edifice.

'Four years old, however, is rather young to choose a career,' objected Miguel lazily, and pinched the child's ear.

'There I disagree with you,' returned his brother; 'at four ours was all settled and we could turn somersaults with the best of them.'

'But I don't know that I want him to be an acrobat,' put in Nina carelessly.

'What you want will have nothing to do with it, I'll bet my last franc, Nina,' said Pierre Chanel.

'You think he's so obstinate — the *nino*?'

'We'll call it firm. Anyway, he always knows his own mind.'

Said Ramon, knocking down his castle remorselessly and then getting on his feet to face them all sturdily: 'So can I — some-sault ——'

'The deuce you can,' said Pierre; 'let's see you do it.'

Expecting that like most young mothers Nina would object to her son's indulging in so venturesome a display, Salvatore glanced at her quickly, but all she did was to laugh and shrug her shoulders.

'I might have known you'd teach him all your tricks, boys,' she said.

Apparently taking very little interest in Ramon's didactic assertion, she almost turned her back on the busy group in the center of the room. Leaning her head against the embroidered back of her chair, she looked thoughtfully out of the window. By this time the toys had all been pushed aside in a heap — wooden soldiers, bricks, the uncoupled carriages of a painted tin train, a clockwork bear; and Pierre Chanel and the twins were laying on the floor a thin mattress, which Manuel pulled off a kind of low divan Salvatore had not remarked before. An air of satisfactory anticipation was noticeable in all. This done to their liking, the three took up strategical positions — at each end and at one side: the side nearest the stove. Meanwhile, Ramon, with the confident air of one who attempted nothing new or unusual — very like his father there, reflected the interested *impresario* — stood poised, small hands flung above his head, at the far end.

'Now you're going to see something,' promised Miguel.

Said Nina, laughing, seeing that Salvatore's attention was not on her: 'Come, don't bother about those children. They are all babies when it comes to tumbling. I never saw such a set. But do you tell me why you have been so long looking me up. I was to have trained only two years, you know. It is nearly four since I left Italy.' She sighed involuntarily. 'But you can believe I've worked hard all the time. I've treated you very fairly.'

Salvatore looked at her quickly. He wondered exactly what she meant by that.

'Manja Gebirge,' went on Nina, before he could ask her, 'has been very good to me. I owe her a lot. It was she who told me you were on your way to Paris weeks ago — she went to London to-day.'

'Yes, I know,' said Salvatore. 'As a matter of fact, it was she who ordered me to come and see you. And I hope to Heaven, Nina, when you are as famous a *cantatrice* as I shall undoubtedly make you before long ——'

'You seem very sure.'

'—— That you will not lead me such a mad dance as Elvira Trazinsky — my last song-bird — has been doing. She has made an old man of me with her tempers.'

Nina shrugged her shoulders. '*Ma che*,' she said, 'how do I know what I shall be like — if I am ever really as successful as that. They say fame does strange things to one.'

Salvatore frowned and shook a finger at her. 'If you don't keep your pretty head,' he retorted with mock

ferociousness, 'I shall beat you. That is the privilege of age and celebrity — one can chastise the young. Remember that you may enjoy fifteen, perhaps with care twenty, years of adulation and flattery from the public — but after that you can whistle for your audiences and starve, for all they care.'

'Well, well,' said Nina.

'The public,' he solemnly finished, 'is nothing more or less than a tiger — always on the prowl to pounce. It will purr and clap when you please it and go home and say, "She's not half as good as she was last year — what made the woman wear such frightful clothes, too?"' Again he shook a warning finger. 'Nobody ever knows when it will turn and rend the old favorite. Out-of-date — old-fashioned — that's how it damns you. I have just seen a case of the kind. It was not exactly pleasant to observe.' He sighed heavily. 'And it does not matter how hard you have tried to please them or how good you have been to your mother. No, no, it's always a case of "Thumbs down" with the audience that is bored or disappointed. What matter whose heart is broken? It's only a puppet that sings or dances or plays.' His tone was so somber that Nina shivered. 'Remember always they have paid good money to hear you, and make your hay while the sun is out.'

'*Dios!*' cried Nina. 'Perhaps I'd better make my living some other way.'

Salvatore shook his head, stroked his beard, and studied her. 'No,' he said, 'there will be no other way for you, my dear child. You were born to sing.'

'You seem very certain,' again she said, but she did not contradict him.

And, looking at her, he could see plainly how much she had changed since that summer in Italy when he had first laid pitying eyes on her — having heard so much gossip — sitting so listlessly on a bench in the public gardens of San Remo, with her infant and old Teresa. To-day her beauty was matured, her air was intriguingly aloof and indifferent. Only her smile was still the same half-wistful, half-gay, attractive thing which had made him anxious to help her then and which would always have the power to make those who knew her rush madly to do impossible tasks for her. Indubitably some fairy had tucked its elfin gift in her cradle and in consequence Nina would never lack service.

'Why have you not used your allowance for the past year?' he suddenly shot at her. 'On what have you been living — air?'

But if he expected to disconcert her, the effort was a failure. Nina simply made a face at him.

'Do I look as if I did?' she demanded — then shook her head. 'I was getting too deeply involved, dear sir. Suppose I turned out a failure, after all?'

'Little danger of that,' he said, his eyes again straying to Ramon, who was now executing with beautiful ease a series of really intricate somersaults amidst encouraging cries and much applause from his select audience. 'Aren't you afraid of the child's breaking his neck?' he asked brusquely.

Nina glanced across the room at her flushed, intent little son.

'No,' she said slowly; 'he's too well trained. And he must learn to be a man — to take risks. Manuel and

Miguel have had him for a whole year now. Luckily for him they've been appearing in the city here for a long time. Malida is very popular in all the music-halls. And he's been a good little pupil. He could do funny little tricks this time last summer, even.'

The performance concluded, Ramon ran up to her, rosy with exercise and triumph. 'Didn't I do it well, Nina?' he asked, leaning heavily against her. 'I shall be 'n acrobat one of these days — you see.'

Nina put her arm round him: 'Very well, we shall see, Beautiful. But now run away to the kitchen and ask Lucie for a drink of milk. I'm sure she's back now.'

Obediently the child raised his vivid dark little face to hers for the kiss which obviously completed moments of this confidential sort, waved a small hand impartially at the rest of them, and vanished. Nicolini brought his straying attention back to Nina and her affairs, but he quite forgot that she had not really answered his question about the allowance he had made her. He looked at his watch — time was getting on. He must not forget that he had an important engagement later that afternoon.

'Let me hear you sing, child,' he said.

Nina got up from her chair, lazily stretched her arms above her head, and called to Pierre: 'He wants to hear me sing, and on such a lovely day, too. You men are all alike. It's always business with you. Never mind about tidying up the room. Monsieur must at once hear me warble.'

Pierre Chanel came across to her eagerly. 'Yes,' he cried, 'but let it be one of your gypsy songs, Nina.'

And he went over to the piano and began to play

softly. Nina stood where she was, and for the second time that afternoon sang for Salvatore Nicolini.

2

After that day things moved rapidly — so rapidly that Pierre Chanel at last began to feel as though he were living in a series of earthquakes.

It began with Nina having to attend rehearsals on the stage of the Opéra Comique nearly every day. It seemed that Nicolini was set on her making her début as Carmen and making it within the next four weeks. Where, he had not yet made up his mind — he said. From amongst the students at the Conservatoire he managed to assemble a fair cast for her to rehearse with; dug out, too, from some obscure cranny an excellently musical, though not too sober, conductor and a small but highly efficient orchestra; who to a man instantly succumbed to Nina's fascination as well as her voice. All these people he swore to a deep secrecy concerning the business in hand, and Nina, for purposes of his own that were already well defined in his astute mind. Properly launched, he knew he could make the girl a sensation. Then he kept every one's nose to the grindstone remorselessly.

'Madame de Segovia must be familiarized with her medium, though she may possess one of the golden voices of the world. I am delighted to see you agree with me that I have a song-bird there,' he replied to the one or two ancient cronies he admitted occasionally to hear her sing — again for purposes of his own.

There is nothing like a little mystery to whet men's curiosity and set their tongues wagging. When asked

by them why he insisted on her going through Bizet's opera as though for a state performance at least twice a week, he smiled, stroked his beard, and talked vaguely about the value of acquiring a velvet smoothness in a production, a *maestro's* certainty of attack: though except for the lack of an audience the whole thing appeared to his musical friends as smooth as anything a paying public could hope to witness, and Nina a remarkable Carmen. Still Nicolini did not seem entirely content. Therefore, at other times she went over parts which did not exactly please him, again and again, till every one was worn out. It was then that a new Nicolini was seen — very exacting: rarely given to praising, often to blaming; one who allowed a natural gift for sarcasm and ridicule full play. Nina, however, accustomed as she had been for many years to Rodriguez's brutal methods, seldom lost her temper or her poise. Her good-humored patience during rehearsal was practically unshakable. To her it was all in the day's work. With a superb indifference she would listen to his scoldings. When, for instance —

'My good God! girl,' he would roar at her from the empty parterre, 'are you perhaps offering the man a breakfast food, or oranges and nuts for the smoother working of his stomachic juices? I always understood, but doubtless I am mistaken, that you were supposed to be at this point in the evening driving the wretched stick demented for love of you.'

'No, not really!' murmured Nina under her breath to the young man who was timidly approaching her as Don José, assuming immediately thereafter an appearance of rapt and nun-like innocence which set her *impresario* raging even more violently.

'The way you're behaving now — making vacant cows' eyes at him — wouldn't alarm a Sunday-school teacher. Where's your damned allure, girl? Let's see something pseudo-devilish that will at least shock the *maître d'hôtel*, let us say.'

Thus vehemently besought, on this occasion Nina stopped in the middle of her aria — Salvatore's healthy bellow had as usual risen well above the orchestra — and, leaving Don José planted in his corner, swearing fluently under his breath — for he came from Columbus, Ohio, and was young and couldn't bear to hear Nina so bullied — she walked composedly to the footlights and peered tranquilly into the dark spaces of the empty house. The orchestra, of necessity resting on its laurels, waited for the storm at last to burst. But Nina had her own methods.

Still preserving the cowlike placidity of expression of which he had so hotly complained, 'But,' she objected mildly, 'a *maître d'hôtel*, dear Salvatore, is not very easily shocked. Consider what a wide experience is his. And do not set me too hard a task. Remember, dear master, I am but a young, untried aspirant to musical honors — as yet.'

Somewhere from the murky depths below her, a chuckle emanated.

'Nonsense!' growled Salvatore. 'You can be the most irritating of women, Nina. You know what I mean, perfectly. You can sing that rôle right — yes. When you like. But it seems to me you don't often like. You're lazy, my girl, that's what you are — lazy.'

'I'm Spanish,' she reminded him.

'Then be — Spanish,' he retorted waspishly. 'The

kind of Spaniard the audience will expect. I don't want a tame cat. I want a tiger out for blood — with occasionally softer moments.'

Nina emitted an unexciting noise that she announced was supposed to represent a tiger's snarl. Then she nodded at blear-eyed Monsieur Flix, the conductor. 'We'll go on,' she said. 'But, dear, dear,' she added confidentially to the entire orchestra, some two dozen souls in all, 'what he really wants is an animal act. Too much for the money. Mind, Salvatore, I shall expect all this menagerie work remembered in my salary.'

And, tripping cheerfully back to the now giggling Don José, she became Carmen again.

But what really did annoy her was that her tyrannical manager was also forcing her to lead a most secluded and regular life. Peremptorily he cut out all amusements that took her into the public eye. No more dining at gay little restaurants about the Quarter, where she knew every one and every one knew her, calling her Nina at the tail-end of vociferous and warm terms of endearment. No more amusing picnics in the Bois or expeditions to Fontainebleau, or suppers, light-hearted and late, in the trees *chez* Robinson, with some jocund group of raffish students and their girls, from the great Étienne's atelier in the court below. Festivities where she was just as ready to sing her gypsy songs to the world and his wife as they were to applaud warmly her efforts, whilst a dozen boys sketched for dear life — Nina, guitar, and a background of uproarious admirers. Hardly would Salvatore have allowed her to see such dear and familiar friends as the twins or Pierre Chanel,

only there she had flatly rebelled. And, perceiving that he could drive her only so far, Salvatore had compromised on this point, though with a very bad grace. He hated opposition of any kind to his carefully worked-out plans.

'Mind, you'll regret it, yet,' he said. 'Your voice should be your first thought. Early to bed — early to rise — no friends hanging about disturbing you — that's the way to immortality — plus never-ending hard work.'

'I am certainly getting enough of that,' Nina sighed, on hearing this severe pronouncement. 'But I'm going to keep human, just the same.'

But after three weeks of such intensive culture and forcing, she began to feel about as desperate as she had done at San Remo after Ramon was born: though, on this occasion, she presumed there would be an end to this slave-driving, sooner or later.

'And I should very much like to know when that is to be,' she complained one hot evening to Manuel, after she had returned to the rue Boissonnade after a particularly hard and seemingly unsatisfactory day's toil at the theater. To her dismay, Nicolini hadn't even remained to watch the new business he had insisted on her putting into the last act, because he thought a deeper touch of pathos than was usual with other Carmens would be effective for her. So she had been dying beautifully for no one — simply empty benches.

'I don't believe he even thinks I can sing, any more.'

And with a passionately reckless gesture of despair, she flung her perfectly new poppy-wreathed hat across the room.

Manuel dexterously put out a hand and caught it. 'But you ought to be thankful,' he returned, 'that he didn't shut you up in some hotel across the river with a tart old duenna — a kind of stage mother — to watch grumpily your every movement.'

'And why?'

'Perhaps not even let you see us.'

'He tried that,' said Nina stormily.

'But some things he can't have all his own way, eh?'

'Certainly not,' said Nina. 'Who *is* Salvatore?'

'Just wait — have a little patience — use a little common-sense,' advised Manuel; 'you're only a caterpillar now.'

This phase certainly did not appeal to Nina, who shrugged her shoulders. 'Heaven grant me enough of the virtue you mention,' she cried, 'to go on. Lord knows, I need it. *Dios!* to be a caterpillar, if that's what I am, Manuel, is too much like living in a strait-waistcoat.'

He smiled at her encouragingly. 'Soon you'll be the most gorgeous butterfly.'

'Soon I shall be dead,' she retorted gloomily; and, going over to the piano, she sat down on the stool and began to strum quite loudly.

'But first you'll be a magnificent specimen of Lepidoptera,' repeated Manuel firmly.

'Long words,' said Nina. 'But I'm sure I hope so,' she added, in that tone of voice which invariably conveys acute disbelief, 'or I swear I'll give it all up. I dare say I am a bonehead, and, as he remarks so elegantly, ivory from the waist up, possessing neither heart nor brains — thank Heaven, he concedes me a good diges-

tion — but I'm tired of being told it all day. I've more than half a mind to go back to my dancing with you and Miguel. That needs very little brain, thank the Saints.'

Manuel regarded her quizzically. 'I'm not so sure of that,' he said. 'Though we all know the musical world thinks it's the only one endowed with gray matter.'

Nina raved on, still playing very badly snatches of popular music, which made Manuel shudder. 'What a dreadful pianist you are!' he cried.

'At least the act will always give me enough to live on — and get Ramon educated — where is the child? Out with Pierre, I suppose. Only I won't be able to send him to quite so expensive a school. And perhaps that will be better for the angel, too. He will in the end have to work for his living — doesn't that sound funny to-day? The tiny little thing he is. And I believe I like the kind of life better — I'm a circus clown, after all.'

And, having voiced this conclusion, she began to play chopsticks very loudly. 'Some one said that to me, years ago,' she added.

'Now you're talking through your hat ——'

'I'm not — it's on the chair over there, where you put it.'

'And would you please stop that infernal din?' shouted Manuel.

But Nina, being in one of her most exasperating moods, took not the slightest notice of the boy's agonized petition.

'What do I want to be an opera singer for?' she declaimed.

'You give me a pain,' he said.

'No; if Salvatore doesn't let down these prison bars of his pretty soon, I shall just run away with Ramon and you all ——'

'It's getting too much of a habit with you, dear Nina,' muttered Manuel.

This shot sent the color into her cheek, but she continued loudly: 'Next month, when you start for New York. I've never been there yet, and I believe I'd like to go. They say the air's like champagne. Rodriguez would never give me away to Salvatore because I'm cheap and, besides, I help the act — you know I do.'

'Did anybody contradict you? Why the quite unnecessary heat? But you won't go to New York — yet.'

Perhaps it was his reminder that she had already run away from unpleasant situations twice in her life which fretted her still further, but now she struck a final harsh discord, and, rising to her feet, stared moodily in front of her. For the moment she seemed to have forgotten Manuel; then she looked at him and observed quite wistfully:

'I could say all that without conceit. Though nobody really seems to want me, or value me. Isn't that odd? In all my life nobody has really admired me.'

'*Unsinn!*' interrupted Manuel rudely. 'You know how much we all adore you.'

'Need you say it in so harsh a tone?' plaintively demanded Nina. 'Anyway, I'm just sick of being yelled at by Salvatore — just sick of it. He can go and rake out some one else from the hay to sing for him.'

Said Manuel, watching her keenly as she prowled restlessly about the room: 'Don't you know enough by this time, Señora, to come in out of the rain? Are you

indeed witless? Don't you understand, you poor fool, he's making you with miraculous rapidity into the most amazing Carmen of the century?'

Nina stood stock-still in the center of the floor to stare at him.

'Bosh!' she cried, after a moment; 'affection, my good idiot, blinds your eyes. That's really a very pretty idea of yours, dear Manuel, only I happen to have the best of reasons for knowing Salvatore thinks me putrid. Why, this morning he even praised that pure simpleton, Escamillo — till I nearly burst out laughing in his face. The boy — a nice fellow and excellent as a floorwalker, I should imagine — cannot *sing* — just can't sing. Well, if he admires his voice ——'

Manuel moved to the window and sat himself down on the ledge.

'Whoof, it's hot!' he said. 'Well, Nina, I congratulate you. You've certainly begun to acquire the singer's jargon, if nothing else. Oh, that gives me hope, indeed —— ' He broke off to wave negligently to a girl leaning out of a window in a house across the court. 'You'll be one of that happy band of celebrated European squallers yet.'

His sarcasm stopped her again in her pacings to and fro, to face him defiantly. Nina by now was very much on the offensive. 'One thing I promise myself,' she hurled at him; 'if I ever do sing Carmen well enough to cause an extra ripple on the Seine, or the least discomfort to that mythical *maître d'hôtel* Salvatore is always bringing up — mind, I say, if ——'

'Well?' said Manuel as she stopped.

'If I do,' she continued after a moment, even more

heatedly, 'I shall probably run away with the first interesting man I meet who has nothing to do with the theater — which I detest with all my heart — directly afterward.'

'A diplomat or a grand duke, for choice. Ah, bah!' gibed Manuel; 'if you must try anything so hackneyed, at least let him be very wealthy. Nothing else could excuse such a simple action.'

Nina, whose nerves as well as temper were something frayed at the moment, turned her back on him. And Miguel, who had been listening to all this in an indolent silence curled up on the divan — the twins were never far apart — now chuckled audibly. There was a marked note of satire about it.

'Probably it would do your rendering of the part a lot of good, Nina,' he teased. 'You are, when it comes right down to it, far too young to lead the life of a nun as you have been doing for the past few years.'

Astonished at this sudden thrust from Miguel, whose presence she had almost forgotten, Nina turned to stare at the good-looking lad. 'A — nun?' she repeated doubtfully. 'Did you say a — nun?'

'Yes — to all intents and purposes. A beautiful woman like you should certainly have a man of her own,' he drawled. 'As it is, you're wasting your life.'

Deliberately Nina marched over to him and boxed his ears.

Quoted Manuel, winking rapidly at his brother, '"He smiled a sickly smile and he curled up on the floor" — only here it's a divan — "and the subsequent proceedings interested him no more." As a matter of fact, I'm just waking up.'

'You dreadfully precocious and immoral young jack-anapes!' cried Nina wrathfully. 'How do you dare to say such things, Miguel Lopez?'

But the impenitent sinner only laughed with great heartiness and rubbed his ear.

'You can be quite heavy-handed at times,' he returned, unmoved. 'But we were always that — precocious — even at nine years old, if you remember, *adorada*. I think we informed you then it was the life we lived. And, most beautiful one, let me explain, ever since we've gone on in the same old rut. Not much change on a couple of francs, one might say. Just the same unconventional creatures as we were the day Pepe drove up to the inn with his wine barrels. Pity he got shot so soon after — he hadn't much of a gift for smuggling. I wonder what Ronda looks like now. Somehow we never went back after you left us. Yes,' he ended his lengthy speech reflectively, 'Manuel and I are still old men in knowledge of the world.'

Lazily, but with all the grace of a cat, he dodged the cushion his brother hurled at his head. With his greater gift of sensitiveness to atmosphere, Manuel was not at all sure that his twin should have brought up old times at this precise juncture. And whether it was the unexpected reference to Ronda and all that it implied, or whether it was because for the time being she was worn out with rehearsals, Nina certainly now, to the intense discomfiture of both boys, cast herself into the nearest chair and began to cry bitterly.

Why — she did not know herself; because it was a long time since her nights had been disturbed with thoughts of Esteban. Over the old wound at least some

protective covering had at last grown. But everything suddenly seemed hopeless and completely uninteresting once more. She knew she had merely been marking time. And, quite broken-heartedly, she found herself wondering what she might have been doing in this year of grace if she had not run away from Esteban in what was, after all, only a sublimated fit of bad temper. The fact was, she should never have listened to Manja Gebirge in the first place. What did she want to be a prima donna for? And where was he now? — the one man she really loved. What matter if they had quarreled and called each other ridiculous names? She had heard nothing of him since the night of their final disastrous battle; had not even spoken his name to any one. Pierre had been so gentle with her — never asked one tactless question in all this long time. She was very fond of Pierre, of course. But he was not Esteban, her proud, handsome, unkind Esteban. Abandoning herself to a fresh wave of the old grief, she continued to sob even more miserably.

By now the twins were on their feet, all contrition and concern. 'We shouldn't have teased her,' said Manuel, reproaching himself more than his twin.

Miguel came over to her. 'But, Nina — Lovely One,' he cried, 'I was a brute, a beast! I never meant to upset you like that. *Ay de mí!* — don't cry a whole ocean of tears — the room is far too small. Come, cheer up!' He put his arm round her. 'Or you'll find me joining in the dirge, too.'

Nina looked up at him through eyes that swam in tears. 'My head aches,' she said, and she leant against him almost as childishly as her little son was in the habit of doing.

'You don't feel ill, do you?' he questioned her anxiously.

Manuel, coming up on the other side, patted her on the shoulder. '*Nun*,' he said, relapsing into another of the several tongues the twins spoke, '*das Mädchen musz schlafen gehen*. The girl is tired out. I bet she's had no food for hours, either. It's only Nature taking her revenge for too much strain.'

With the pompous air of a physician, Miguel said, 'Put out your tongue, if you please, Señora.'

Nina did so.

'It looks healthy enough. Try her pulse, Manuel.'

Manuel obeyed. 'A bit jumpy,' he declared. 'The kind of pulse actors get on first nights. Nothing to be alarmed about. But she's off to bed at once. At once, Nina darling, do you hear me?'

She nodded and began to dry her eyes. 'But I don't know that I want to ——'

He held up a magisterial hand. 'That does not mean,' he continued severely, taking no notice of her remark, 'in the next two hours when you've tidied all your drawers — especially that top one which is always in such a mess — and decided what hat you'll wear to mass at the Madeleine next Sunday morning. Personally I prefer your dark blue straw with the cherries — you look so perfectly *mondaine* in it. And we are both going to make it our business that you eat a proper supper. *Entends-tu?*'

Together they piloted a very indifferent and spiritless young lady to her little bedroom, patted her affectionately on the back several times, and shut her in, ordering her to be in bed by the time they returned from

interviewing Lucie and prevailing on that snapping-turtle to concoct for the sufferer the most delicious supper of which Nina could ever dream.

'Including strawberries,' said she sarcastically.

These they promised her at once on the bones of some obscure mediæval saint — of an Italian ancestry — rejoicing in the name of Ledardo.

'Whose day comes in June, too; so it's very appropriate.'

Though left so impressively, Nina could not help opening the door a crack after their self-satisfied departure to inquire what would happen if Lucie — whom every one knew to be as obstinate as a mule — did not see eye to eye with them in the matter of refreshment.

'She quite thought I was going to dine out with Pierre, you know. And she hates plans to be disarranged at the last moment. It gives her palpitations.'

'As to that, calm yourself. Are there not restaurants about here?' inquired Miguel in his most lordly way. 'We can always bring the food in, if necessary. Go to bed.'

'I don't know why I was so silly,' persisted Nina. 'After all, boys, I could just as well eat out. I'm not ill. What will Pierre say?'

Manuel returned to close the door firmly in her face and to observe: 'Never mind what Pierre says. He can't bulldoze us, always. That young man has his own way too often. You get into bed, Nina, and let your hair down, my Lovely. We'll soon be back with your supper.'

Then, left to herself, after looking vaguely about her room for some minutes and sniffing a good deal while

she wondered audibly why the world was such a detestable place — one never had any real happiness, it fled even as one grasped it — Nina decided dolefully she might as well go to bed as stay up. Equally she would be wretched and ineffably bored, she expected.

After all, she supposed she was unusually fatigued; certainly wearied to death of rehearsals and music generally. And it was nice of the twins to pet her so charmingly. She was very, very fond of them. Generally she did all the mothering in that house — at least she fancied she did. Yes, the boys were very capable and would probably cajole out of that flint-heart Lucie a far better supper for them all than she would have had the courage to suggest, left to herself.

Carelessly she threw her black silk stockings across the room and, holding a foot in one hand, sat in her chemise on the side of her bed, meditating, for some time. Now and then deep sighs escaped her. Probably she was, after all, rather a weak character; thinking, as Esteban had said more than once, she was cleverer than she really was. Well, could she help that? It did not do to be too diffident — not in the circus or vaudeville business, anyway. Presumably the singing stage was much the same as to tricks of the trade and belief in one's self.

Yawning, Nina shook herself into her nightgown and decided she would go on exactly as she always had — do the next job and let every one else worry about the general excellence of the performance. As long as the curtain went up on time and the audience applauded at the end of the act, nothing could be very wrong. What did audiences want, anyway? Mainly to be

amused. There it was — in four words. As she brushed out her dark hair, she decided she would not bother her head about Salvatore's whimsy-whamsies any more.

And, now she came to think of it, a picnic supper with the twins would be good fun: would do her a lot of good. She'd been allowing herself to become too serious. Nina — serious! That was too silly. Oh, never again; she had had too much of it.

So her thoughts wandered to and fro: jumping like mountain goats from one crag to another. When had they had such an impromptu meal last? Not since that tyrant Salvatore had arrived. He had changed everything. As she creamed her face, she decided she would tell him what she thought of him to-morrow. For once, he should see the Nina that Rodriguez knew — slangy and profane, with the temper of a wild cat.

Yawning again, she went over to the chest of drawers by the open window. 'I'd better get myself a clean handkerchief,' she murmured. 'I suppose they wouldn't call that tidying up. The one I was using drips with my tears.'

Giggling like a schoolgirl at the thought of Manuel's horror if she should now dare to turn out the contents of her top drawer on her bed, Nina began to rummage through its perennial disorder. Suddenly she came across the little cardboard box that held the golden horseshoe. She picked it up.

'I haven't thought of you for a year, at least,' she said, and she stood there weighing it in her hand. Half unconsciously she opened the box. 'I wonder who or what you belonged to,' she said as she looked at it, lying yellow in its bed of cotton wool.

Then, imagining she heard the boys returning along the passage from the kitchen, in a sudden panic she shut the gleaming thing away again in the drawer, snatched a handkerchief, and took a flying leap into bed. There she remained as comfortable as some luxurious golden-eyed cat propped up with pillows. Over her shoulders she had thrown a bright yellow shawl embroidered with blue flowers and birds. Nina and her shawls were constant subjects of jest to the twins — she had so many and wore them so indifferently, no matter what the occasion, whenever she felt like it. All about her, as a cloud, fell her dark hair. Even Esteban could find no fault with it.

'Promise me you'll never cut it,' he had said to her once.

It was a good twenty minutes, however, before the twins reappeared: rather flushed and very triumphant; singing as they came, '*Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre*' fortissimo. Manuel, carrying a crowded supper tray, came immediately behind Miguel, who bore proudly aloft a large pot of steaming coffee and a jug of hot milk.

'I am sure,' said Nina, pointing dramatically at the coffee-pot, 'the sight of that would drive Salvatore demented. He'd rave for an hour about nerves and sleeplessness and my gorgeous voice.'

'But then he's elderly and fussy — we shall be just the same when we're his age,' said Miguel, 'and the young of those days will pity us, and think us poor simpletons.'

'At present, thank the Saints, we all have the digestion of ostriches,' added Manuel.

He swung his tray capably onto the bed as Miguel

deposited his burdens on the table by Nina's pillows with a flourish.

'What the eye does not take in, the brain cannot worry over,' he remarked sententiously.

'And what a very restful reflection that is!' returned Manuel, sitting on the end of the bed and lifting dish covers high in the air to attract Nina's attention.

His maneuver was not unsuccessful. Nina clapped her hands. '*Dios!*' she cried, 'where did you get the strawberries? What delicious-looking cream! And chicken in a casserole, and mushrooms. What an angel of a supper! How did you manage it?'

'We were assisted by Saint Ledardo,' said Manuel, and refused to give away the secret if there were any. 'As a matter of fact, Miguel knows where the body is buried,' he added cryptically. 'So Lucie can't help herself. We have her as in a vise.'

Only too pleased that their dear Nina was out of the dumps and looking rather like an angel painted on an inexpensive Christmas card, as they poetically informed her, the twins used all their art to keep her cheerful. The meal was therefore proceeding with a noisy gayety when Pierre Chanel walked in on them with Ramon.

3

It seemed that he and Ramon had encountered a very expansive and beaming Salvatore on their way down the Champs Élysées earlier in the afternoon: a Salvatore who, slapping Pierre most surprisingly and jovially on the back, insisted on forthwith hailing a taxi and taking them both to the Café Napolitain in the Capucines for ices.

'What on earth made him do that?' murmured Miguel. 'I did not know you were so popular with him, Pierre.'

'Put it down to Ramon,' returned Pierre. 'I can tell you it was a very welcome idea on this hot afternoon.'

'That was very nice of Salvatore,' said Nina as Ramon scrambled up beside her on the outside of the flowered counterpane. 'And did my angel enjoy himself?'

Ramon, encircled by her arm, put up his face for a kiss, nodding gravely.

'I 'joyed myself very much, Nina,' he replied. 'An' he took us for a drive in the Bois, after. I like him,' the child added with that little air of decision so characteristic of him.

'So glad,' murmured Nina, but she looked a little uncertain. 'As Miguel suggests — why the sudden expansiveness, do you suppose?'

Manuel at once urged her not to cultivate a suspicious nature. 'You and my brother seem to possess such flatly distrustful temperaments, *preciosa*. Why couldn't the poor man take the child for an airing? He has a real affection for him ——'

Ramon, glancing wisely from one to the other, murmured, 'I like him,' again, though no one heard him.

'Must he have an ulterior motive?' demanded Manuel.

'No — no,' but she still looked dubious.

However, before Manuel could say anything more, Ramon interrupted their discussion to remark pensively that he had seen an enormous balloon in a shop in the Capucines. The better to emphasize its breath-taking size, he held out his small arms in the widest gesture of

which he was capable, then continued with a deep sigh: 'It was too 'normous. With a picture of a windmill on it, Nina. And it was a bright, bright red. Can we go and buy it to-mor'ow, *encantadora?*' His coaxing little voice was very like his father's — just so had Esteban asked for her heart. Well, well — she must not keep on thinking of a dead past in this weak way. She must pull herself together. 'Also,' finished Ramon, determined to get in all his requests at the one time, 'the wee-est little goat — wiv a cart and a tiny man driving — holding a whip wiv a red lash.'

Meeting her small son's anxious gaze absently, Nina said, 'Yes, darling, I dare say,' and relapsed into a troubled silence.

Pierre, who had meanwhile been vainly wandering round the sitting-room next door, hunting for an ash-tray — 'I can't think where they all get to. *Ciel!* we buy enough' — now came to sit by Manuel on the end of Nina's bed, which had a high carved back but practically no foot to it. It was an old-time Spanish type Pierre, about a year previously, had picked up very cheaply for her in some ancient dusty furniture shop in the Quarter, and had had cleaned and polished; so that again, as it had always been intended to be, it was an object of haunting beauty.

Ramon, reassured on the subject of new toys for the morrow, decided the time had come to fetch his own supper from Lucie — a glass of milk and a gingerbread horse — and trotted purposefully out of the room.

Over her coffee-cup Nina regarded Pierre thoughtfully. 'You look simply chock-full of secrets,' she said. 'Have you heard anything? Anything exciting, I mean.

What did Salvatore have to say to you? For I'm sure his affection for Ramon had very little to do with his haling you off for a couple of hours. Come, own up. Am I due for some shattering blow?'

Pierre laughed, and Miguel, seated in the only arm-chair the room contained, tossed a cigarette over to him.

'Don't mind her,' he advised; 'the *mädel's* running through a markedly morbid streak this evening. Such a time as Manuel and I have had with her! The fact is she can't bear too much excitement. Like some supper?' he asked, as an obvious afterthought.

Pierre caught and lighted the cigarette. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Now, Nina, darling, don't work yourself up. And all shall be laid bare before you ——'

'Like bones,' said she.

'Yes, like bones. But is there anything left?' Pierre continued doubtfully, staring at the tray on the bed. 'The Lord knows I'm hungry.'

'Healthy men should be,' intoned Manuel didactically. 'And there's plenty here.' He looked into the casserole in a business-like way. 'Yes, plenty. I'll go and fetch you a cup and plate.' And he went quickly out of the room.

'Now perhaps you'll pay some attention to me,' suggested Nina plaintively, 'having thought of the necessities of both your outer and inner man.'

Pierre's eyes were full of mischief as they met hers, and he smiled broadly. 'Of what are you dreaming, Madame de Segovia, when you speak of disaster? Far, far from it, Ninetta *mia*. For the Signor Nicolini, amongst other items of information, sandwiched in between much good advice while driving us in the Bois,

stated distinctly that to-morrow is to be your last day of unremunerative toil ——'

He laughed again at her wide eyes of amazement. That trick of hers always fascinated him afresh every time he saw them get bigger and bigger and darker and darker. 'How do you do it, Nina?' he had often teased her.

'The last day?' she repeated.

'Yes; after to-morrow you will be as the lily of the field for a time. Toiling not — nor spinning.'

'I never did know how to spin,' she murmured, 'so I couldn't have sung Marguerite in "Faust" ——'

'On the same principle as the serving wench who couldn't write home to her mamma because she'd sprained her ankle, eh?' gibed Pierre.

Nina laughed.

'Now don't interrupt — when I'm dealing in metaphor,' he rebuked her.

'Oh, need you?'

'It adds a literary flavor to my otherwise perfectly commonplace conversation,' he explained.

Again Nina's laugh rang out, and both males, watching her affectionately, smiled confidentially at each other.

'It's nice to know that, of course,' she admitted.

Pierre shook a reproving fist at her. 'Come, don't make eyes at me, girl. It affects my sight, hearing, and brain. As I was saying, Nicolini has now done his worst and within the next ten days has every intention of seeing you make your début.'

Nina caught her breath. 'Oh, where?'

'That he did not confide to me.'

Manuel, returning at this instant with necessary crockery and cutlery for Pierre, clashed everything violently together, uttering loud 'Vivas.'

In the great bed Nina sat very upright, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed with the excitement of this news. 'Well — there!' she cried; 'who would have guessed it? It all goes to show the man is a mountain of deceit. I wish you could have seen those contemptuous looks he launched at me only to-day — the blank stares.'

'He was trying to think, probably,' said Miguel.

'Naturally I expected the next object to be presented to me would be the empty and entire sack.'

Miguel, now snatching from his brother a large and thick white china cup, began to pour coffee and hot milk into it simultaneously from a height as though he were emptying beer into a stein.

'Well, I imagine that settles it,' he remarked. 'You won't be going to New York with us now, for all your brave words, madonna. By the time we sail you'll be in lights, I shouldn't wonder: at least well launched on your sea of glory.'

'Bubbles — soap bubbles,' Nina declaimed. 'Remember the lecture Salvatore endowed me with that first afternoon he dropped in from the clouds.'

'As I remember, he gave you most excellent advice,' said Pierre, 'as to making hay while the sun is at work.'

Nina made one of her faces at him. 'I didn't even think you were listening to all that farrago.'

'Oh, yes. I hear a lot one way and the other. Mine is a very retentive brain. I'm like Cæsar, too. I can do more than one thing at a time.'

Making a long arm, he took the filled coffee-cup, now resting more normally on its rotund saucer, from Miguel, helped himself to chicken — what was left of it. 'You're hearty eaters,' he complained, 'and I thought I was dining out with Nina,' and sat himself down again at the end of the bed.

To placate him, Nina blew him a kiss. 'I'll dine with you to-morrow night,' she promised.

By this time Manuel was apportioning the strawberries. 'The girl had the megrims,' he explained. His fingers hovered delicately over the four glass bowls. 'Perhaps two extra berries for Nina — very large and juicy ones.'

Pierre, eating his chicken leg, asked suddenly, reverting to an earlier topic: 'And why New York?'

Miguel undertook the task of bringing his knowledge up to date.

'One of her wild ideas, though she'll get there some day. She was considering a line of retreat in case Salvatore fired her.' And he began to laugh with unaffected heartiness.

Said Nina, casting down her eyes: 'Though you may none of you believe it, mine is an unusually modest nature.'

But Ramon, coming back at this juncture from a long and confidential parley with Lucie, carrying his glass of milk and his gingerbread horse, off which he had already bitten the flowing tail, alone saved her from that torrent of cheap witticism which such an announcement let loose in their volatile minds.

'Hush,' she commanded, holding out her hand for the strawberry bowl Manuel had filled for her; 'it is not well

to cast ridicule on the mother of the child. Consider that, being a parent, I have to live up to an ideal, Manuel darling.' Gayly she blew him a kiss. 'A thousand thanks for picking me out quite the finest specimens in the dish. A little cream and sugar now and the whole thing will be perfect. That is exactly as it should be — seeing that I am only a poor, weak woman, and naturally greedy.'

However, in spite of Pierre's assurances, it was not till the next day that she definitely began to believe in her career of song.

But, sitting under the shady chestnut trees of the Champs Élysées, eating her lunch at the expensive restaurant to which Nicolini had whisked her after her final short but delirious rehearsal of that morning, Nina had to admit to herself that here she seemed to be at another crossroads of life.

Still in her ears sounded those impassioned farewells from the whole band of men and women who had been working with her and for her so loyally. Their good wishes and their cheers — as for a star already arrived — yet rang over-loudly in her brain. Indeed, the whole episode, after she had sung her final haunting number and had died, before Nicolini this time, pathetically and beautifully, had been as intoxicating as it was unexpected. Not every potential star receives an ovation from the orchestra and those who have sung with her.

'Nina de Segovia! The new, the great Carmen! Nina — our Nightingale!'

Warm-hearted, effusive, and eminently emotional and Gallic, the entire scene had been. Nina, with tears in her eyes, had looked quite lost — yet there was some-

thing very heady in their whole-hearted admiration, and when she had thanked them and ended by singing for them a couple of her gypsy songs, there had been no limit to their applause. And then to have them all rushing at her with flowers — oceans of flowers. And the theater resounding with 'Vivas!' and good wishes again — and more cheering — and still more cheering.

It was quite a relief when finally Nicolini packed her, flowers and all, into his car. Now she sat, outwardly composed and very smart, eating her lunch; taking no notice of the glances, inquisitive, admiring, appraising, cast at her by nearly every man within sight and to whom the gift of two eyes had been made by Providence.

Salvatore, bland and fatherly — as she would for the next twenty years now see him — behind his cigar and huge cup of coffee, the strongest, blackest variety procurable, watched her benignly. To him she was his newest and therefore best work of art, and on that account to be handled with the greatest care and delicacy, after he had had one necessary business talk with her. If — as of course they would — they came to a proper understanding, she would never have to complain of Salvatore — good old wise Salvatore. Every one knew he spoiled his artists — Bojer had often said he was too damned good-natured. But if his method brought results? Well, then?

'You really are a very lovely young thing,' he said at last, in a musing tone, almost as though he had just happened on that pleasant discovery for an *impresario.* 'You'll look your parts as well as sing them.'

Returned Nina, laughing openly at him: 'A good many of my admirers seem to be of your opinion.'

'Including young Chanel,' said Salvatore deliberately.

Nina frowned: this was a note she did not wish struck. In her heart she knew Salvatore to be no friend of Pierre's, though why he should be jealous of him, she could not understand; not realizing it was Pierre's influence on her he feared.

'I'm very fond of him,' she said coolly. 'Do not forget for four years he has been my best friend.'

Across the table Salvatore stroked his beard and stared at her. 'But you can't drag that young man about with you always, Nina.'

Liking his veiled satiric tone little, she returned: 'You know he has a good job as *chef d'orchestre* in one of those new *thé dansant* places, besides going to Lu Lu's three times a week.'

Lu Lu's, as Nicolini had made it his business to find out, was a restaurant that catered mainly to the foreign visitor, its orchestra having recently acquired quite a reputation, thanks to Pierre.

'Oh, well,' said Salvatore carelessly, 'he won't stay there forever, I suppose. As it happens, I offered him yesterday a far better job with one of my singers who's doing a two years' tour.'

'Two years,' said Nina. 'That's a long time. But I'm very glad — it was good of you to think of him, Salvatore.'

Her tone was placid, indifferent. Nicolini shot her a shrewd glance. 'Well, you make the young fool accept it,' he said. 'He'll probably take your advice; that is, if he can see beyond his nose, and perceive what is for his ultimate good and what isn't.'

'Of course I can make him accept your offer,' said

Nina. 'Pierre is very ambitious, and wants to carve a niche for himself in the world. Do you think he likes having to think twice before he takes a taxi, or is mad about living in that little, bare hotel behind the Magasin du Louvre?'

Salvatore smiled, flicked the ash off the end of his cigar into the saucer of his coffee-cup, and observed: 'His hotel doesn't see much of him — he seems to be at your place most of the day when he isn't working.'

'And — who cares?' asked Nina shortly.

But having established exactly what he intended, Salvatore would not be drawn. It was not part of his plan to come into the open where Pierre was concerned. Once remove Nina from the vicinity of that young idealist, Salvatore was sure absence would weaken the bond just as much as he wished, especially now that he knew Nina was not in love with the boy. Pierre's feelings were of no account to him. So far, then — so good.

Absently he looked across the avenue to where in the bright sunlight flashed never-ending streams of carriages, buses, and some taxis — all Paris seemed to be out that day. The paths were crowded with people, too. After a moment he began to talk on quite other subjects.

'Manja Gebirge suggested you ought to sing this season,' he began.

Nina, glad to change the topic, said: 'She is having an enormous success in London. I had a letter from her yesterday. But she seems very worried about Clovis,' and she laughed.

'That infernal cat! I hope, Nina, you will never acquire some dreadful, pampered animal, all fat and bad temper.'

Salvatore looked so harassed that Nina began to laugh again.

'The trouble I have had traveling these pets!'

Nina, still laughing, said: 'I have Ramon.'

Salvatore frowned. 'Well, the same remark applies. Don't pamper the child. He's a decent enough little fellow now ——'

Considering that such lukewarm praise was very far from what was due her talented son, said Nina, most indignantly, 'He's an angel!'

Good-humoredly Salvatore leaned across the small table and patted her arm.

'*Va bene* ——' he said. 'Well, there are good and bad, you know — angels, I mean.' And only chuckled the more when he saw how angry he was making her. 'Oh, la, la, simmer down, you little saucepan of hot water,' he went on after a moment. 'The child is a very archangel, if you wish. But as for me, I want to talk about my plans for you. Can you listen to me? Or is rage still making you deaf?'

'I can listen to you perfectly, Signore,' returned Nina, glacially polite.

'*So, schön.* Well, then' — he took a long breath — 'to business. You are to make your début in Carmen immediately. To-morrow I have made arrangements for your dresses to be fitted. The only question is at which of three opera houses ——'

'Three?'

'Yes; Brussels would be excellent in many ways.'

In spite of her wrath over his attitude toward Ramon's perfections, Nina found herself becoming interested.

'I have never been to Brussels,' she said. 'Is it a pretty city? And would there be a park for Ramon to play in?'

Salvatore nodded. 'A very pretty city — but you probably would not have much time to see it on this occasion, my dear child. You would be singing at least twice, or three times, perhaps. As for a park for Ramon' — his eyes twinkled as if he considered he was about to utter a good joke — 'there is the Bois de la Cambre, which should be adequate for the stoutest-hearted child.'

Nina, reassured on the subject of a suitable playground for Ramon, remained staring absently at the traffic on the avenue and said nothing more.

After a moment Salvatore went on: 'As I was saying — Brussels would be excellent in many ways. Though' — and he watched her narrowly, as he said it, out of the corner of his eye — 'I have an idea you should sing first of all in Madrid. After all, it is your own country. That would place you definitely as a Spanish singer in the minds of your future audiences, which is always good. People like to think they know all about the stars they see glittering in the musical sky.'

Nina caught her breath sharply. 'I will never sing in Madrid,' she muttered, 'never.' And though the day was a very warm one, she suddenly shivered.

Nicolini, having now learned what he had for some time been desirous of knowing, continued as if he had not heard her:

'But London, of course, would be best of all. It's the height of the season there now. London in June is delightful, too. And everybody of any sort of consequence will hear you.'

Nina turned impulsively toward him. 'Then let it be London. I assure you I want to be earning as soon as possible. Do you not want me to sign a contract with you ——'

'All in good time.'

'I have Ramon always to think of, you know. Perhaps,' she went on, frowning thoughtfully, 'I could find him a school there. Oh, yes, London would be the best place, I am sure.'

Nicolini fairly stared at her. Nina was always surprising him. Such an unemotional, matter-of-fact point of view was astounding, he considered. And to be preoccupied with a question of Ramon's education at such a moment was too ridiculous.

'My dear girl,' he remonstrated, 'what are you thinking of? A school — at his age! Don't be absurd. It is a baby still. Probably can just repeat his alphabet. Can't you forget your child for an hour or so? And take some interest in your career? One would think it was a question of a mere Sunday-school entertainment from the lukewarm concern you show.'

Perceiving that he was quite upset, Nina turned on Salvatore one of her most coaxing glances: the kind that most men found irresistible. Then she held out her hand across the table.

'But of course I take an interest, dear Salvatore,' she returned. 'Only Ramon is so bound up with it all. And all yesterday I was thinking that it would not be fair to him to drag him half over the earth after me. That would be a dreadful life for him, angel *de mi vida*. Besides, he will not always remain at four years of age, you know' — she leaned confidentially toward him. 'And

I'll confess something to you. I have always intended him to go to school in England. It's such a nice, straight kind of country for boys. Oh, I've collected a lot of information on the subject.' She smiled at him quite wistfully. 'Then, when he's old enough to take care of himself, he can go to Harvard. That's in America, isn't it? So he'll grow up a sturdy fellow and have the advantage of being taught in two continents.'

Nicolini, secretly very touched by her care for Ramon and quite swung away by now from his original thesis, could only pull at his beard and continue to regard her with kind, rather amused, eyes. That at her age she should be gravely looking so far ahead for her little son, and contemplating so seriously a programme which must inevitably sooner or later almost completely separate her from the baby, struck him as pathetic. And yet there was a great deal of common-sense in the extraordinary plan she had evolved — how, Heaven alone knew — he could see that. But the unselfishness of it certainly moved him. At bottom Salvatore was very tender-hearted. Then, reflecting that, after all, Ramon's education was really no affair of his, he began to laugh.

'My goodness, Nina,' he demanded, 'why Harvard? Whatever put that name into your head?'

Nina laughed too. 'I expect you think me quite mad. But I want him to be — different.'

'To what, or whom?' Yet, even as he asked the question, he guessed the answer.

'He must not be too — Spanish,' murmured Nina.

Salvatore took her hand and, bending over it, kissed the slim fingers. 'My dear,' he said soberly, 'you know

you have only to command me — I am always at your service.'

Nina shot him a grateful glance.

Said Salvatore, clearing his throat: 'Well, that perhaps is the wisest resolve you could have come to. I am more than relieved to know you are so sensible and do not contemplate dragging the little fellow about with you indefinitely. But there is plenty of time before you need separate yourself from him, my dear child.'

'I never meant to drag him about with me,' she returned resolutely. 'So, dear Salvatore,' she continued coaxingly, 'let it be London.'

He laughed and patted her hand again. He was beginning to perceive that Nina was very different from most of his stars. Highly strung as she undoubtedly was, and high-mettled, yet she appeared to regard her forthcoming operatic appearance with the utmost tranquillity. Her mind seemed as composed as if it were only a question of rehearsal. He began to wonder if she realized how momentous a début such as he had in mind for her would be. Seeing her so philosophic and cool-headed, he wondered if she could be entirely without nerves. That didn't seem possible, though it would be a blessed relief to him. He began to chuckle silently as he considered that in all his experience he had never met one successful singer unendowed with temper; or what was euphoniously called 'nerves.' Probably Nina did not realize what singing at Covent Garden in the height of the season implied. When the significance of it all did flash over her, she would probably suffer from 'nerves' all right. From the bottom of his heart, gloom now seizing upon him, he hoped she would not go to

pieces and fail him at the last moment. But that risk must, of course, be taken. Again he wondered — Brussels or London? Madrid he had never seriously considered. On the whole, he did not want her to sing Carmen in Brussels just then. It was always better with first-class goods to carry them to the most expensive market at once. But he had yet to learn that an audience meant simply nothing to Nina. He forgot, or did not know, that she had been facing the footlights since her tenth year. Even in the last twelve-month she had nightly danced with Manuel and Miguel in their celebrated act — half acrobatic, half daring dancing. They meant less than nothing to her — those people beyond the footlights. The excitement of an audience stimulated her certainly. Yet, even so, Salvatore was to see her, on more than one occasion in the future, sing more beautifully to a bare handful of people than to the most clamorous crowd of her career.

'And I won't ever sing in Madrid — so you may just as well know that first as last,' she repeated after a long pause.

'Oh, nonsense, my dear girl.'

'It's not nonsense. I mean it. I won't sing in Madrid. I'll stop singing before I begin unless you give me your word of honor you'll never force me to appear there.'

Breathing quickly, she waited for his answer.

'I think,' said Salvatore smoothly, 'you should tell me why — before I make such a promise. It may mean a great deal of inconvenience to me as well as a big money loss. And, my dear Nina, I'm not in the business for my health merely. On the face of it, that is the most absurd request I have ever listened to.'

Nina met his glance squarely. 'Do you mean to say you don't know quite well?' she demanded.

After a longish pause, in which he again watched the busy streams of traffic up and down the avenue and continued to pull at his cigar, he turned to her and said gently:

'Nina, will you have patience with me? I must, I am afraid, talk to you on a subject that probably is still very painful to you — yet, if I am to manage you successfully, I should know where I stand.'

'Go on,' said Nina.

If only he had had more time at his disposal then, he would have gone very thoroughly into the question of her present reactions toward Esteban Valdez. For what he dreaded more than anything was that the new Duque de Ventura might meet her some fine day and whistle her back to him. Then her career would be finished indeed. But the afternoon was racing by and he had many important things to do. He therefore decided to slip in a piece of news which might help him, if he got the opportunity, and trust to luck that she might not run across her old lover in the next few days; Esteban being then, though she did not know it, in Paris. But on all accounts he must tread warily.

'Nina,' he therefore began quietly, 'may I mention — Esteban Valdez?'

No need to tell her his uncle was dead and he the new duke.

'Why not?' she answered steadily.

'You have never met him — since that night at San Remo four years ago?'

'No.'

'You are still in the same mind as you were then?' He put the question, for all his seeming coolness, a trifle nervously.

'Still.' Her tone was quite firm.

He smiled at her. 'I suppose I am a curious old fool,' he continued, 'but I have often wondered what made you come to Manja's hotel at half-past ten that evening, determined to journey to Paris — when at eight-thirty, shall we say? I heard you singing happily in your garden.'

Nina regarded him somberly. 'He heard me, too,' she said, 'and we had a dreadful quarrel — the last of many ——'

Salvatore noticed how carefully she avoided pronouncing Esteban's name. A bad sign, he thought.

'He heard you sing?'

'Yes — we had had supper and he had remained in the house. He used to leave me to myself so much that I had not the slightest idea he had followed me out into the garden ——'

'Well?'

'He not only heard me sing, but he saw me throw you the flower Manja had arranged I was to fling over the wall if I intended to accept your offer ——'

'Ah!'

'And he heard you call up to me.'

Again Salvatore said 'Ah!'

'It made him furious.'

Said Salvatore easily: 'He always expected too much of you, Nina.' To his concern he saw her eyes were full of tears.

'He said I was always a circus clown ——'

'The young fool!'

'And to make a long story short,' finished Nina, 'we had one of the worst rows I ever remember. I said a great deal more than I meant, Salvatore, and quite suddenly he rushed out of the house, shouting he never wanted to see me again.'

'What did you do then?'

Nina sighed heavily. 'I ran away at once, came to Manja's hotel, and met you for the first time.'

'And now?'

Nina looked at him uncertainly. 'I don't know what that means,' she said.

'You have really finished with it all? You wouldn't leave me in the lurch if you met him — and he asked you?'

Nina shrugged her shoulders. 'For four years I have not made one effort to see him, or write to him. Is not that enough answer? What good would it do me to try and live in the ruins of an old tent?'

'Especially,' said Salvatore slowly, 'as I hear he is going to be married.'

CHAPTER V

I

Of Nina's overwhelming success in Bizet's celebrated opera of 'Carmen' at Covent Garden in the summer of 1912, there still remain many vivid accounts. To put it in a sentence — a crowded and distinguished house listened to her at first critically and then went mad over her. Nothing like the warmth of her reception had been witnessed in the historic old opera house for a long time. As a Cæsar, one might say, she came to Britain, sang and overcame. The final curtain certainly fell to Nicolini's intense satisfaction on a scene of the most spontaneous enthusiasm. He counted nineteen curtain calls, himself. And Nina's flower offerings were as the sands of the sea for multitude. Even Lady Mary Fleetwood, that hoary veteran of many musical seasons who had watched the rise and fall during a long life of more Carmens than she could remember without an effort, allowed herself, for once, to be quite carried away. Completely entranced as she had been by Nina's voice and Nina's fascinating, wayward acting, she could not forbear leaning out of her box at a perilous angle to applaud loudly the new and altogether too captivating singer. Not until she split a pair of brand-new and most expensive suède gloves did she cease from clapping furiously and crying sonorously, 'Brava! Brava!'

Her handgear irretrievably ruined, with an exclamation of annoyance she withdrew herself into her box, again to meet the faint, satirical smile of her old friend, Doña Juanita Valdez. A complete contrast to each

other in every way, it had earlier been a cause of amused speculation to their mutual acquaintance as to what kept them friendly. Attraction of opposites, indeed.

Now, as always, composed and stately, Don Esteban's mother murmured at her elbow: 'Mary, how can you? You are as young as a schoolgirl still. But I am the more flattered, as I understand this new acquisition is Spanish. It is charming to find every one so thrilled over the talents of a compatriot of mine.'

Wrapping the brocade cloak about her which some attentive young man had just brought her from the dim recesses of the box, she added carelessly: 'I see Madame Gebirge approves of her, too. She is in the stalls over there, and clapping almost as violently as you, my dear Mary. I must, when I see her next, ask her who this new Carmen is. She knows every one in the musical world.'

Said Lady Mary in her hearty way: 'Whoever she is — the girl's a genius. And what a voice! A nightingale! Not the slightest effort! This time Nicolini has found something, I admit. I don't know when I've been so moved. The pathos of that death! Quite irresistible.'

In this conclusion she was warmly supported by the three younger members of their party. And José de Premijoy, who had just become engaged to her niece, Susan Kingsford, even went so far as rashly to promise that capricious young person he would prevail on Nicolini, who, he informed Lady Susan, was an old friend of his, to bring the bewitching Madame de Segovia to lunch with them all no later than the next day.

'I know him so well — he is very good-natured. You will see, Suzette. I shall do this for you.'

'If you do,' returned the impressed Lady Susan, 'I shall love you to death, José dear.'

Settling his eyeglass in his light blue, humorous eye, José answered her that now more than ever he would do his best to rope in Madame de Segovia.

'That will make every one happy, eh?'

Not every one, though, Doña Juanita reflected, raising surprised eyebrows. She certainly did not altogether approve of such sudden easy-going intimacies with people of that kind, however famous. Very decidedly she considered the inhabitants of the world of artistic endeavor should remain firmly on their side of the footlights. True, she was on terms of friendly though cool acquaintance with the preposterous Manja Gebirge; but that was more because she had sung for Doña Juanita so often in the past few years than because she actually either approved of or liked the woman. As far as Doña Juanita's fastidious opinion was concerned, she found the over-exuberant Manja altogether too blatant and even at times exasperatingly vulgar. But she was clever enough to realize that to have Madame Gebirge sing for her and her pet charities invariably added luster to her entertainments and meant a crowded and congratulatory audience. And Doña Juanita had always been an ambitious hostess; and was perhaps more than ever determined to count in the society of the day, now that Esteban had succeeded to his uncle's position and estates. To remain an important social factor she would sacrifice much.

But now, ill-advised though it might be in the present

circumstances, she could not help saying — so deep was her prejudice — in a very disapproving tone to Lady Susan: 'Surely that is a little impulsive, my dear, to want her to lunch with you. How do you know she may not be quite impossible socially? It is a mistake to mix the classes, I always think. Those people are so often better left in their own circles, it seems to me.'

To this Lady Susan, who never had liked her aunt's Spanish friend, returned with a laugh: 'Isn't that a shade narrow-minded? Meet her — of course I'm dying to meet her. I'm sure she'll be delightful. I've never seen any one so lovely. Besides, I'm calling José's bluff. He's simply got to produce her for lunch after this, or I shall never believe in him again.'

Such frivolous and light-hearted talk could only make Doña Juanita shrug her shoulders. It was obviously of not the slightest use suggesting to Lady Susan, then at any rate, that if she were wise she would give a wide berth to all beautiful actresses and singers — especially where the easily inflamed José was concerned. Such women were far better out of one's home circle, especially now that Lady Susan was going to become José's countess before the season was over. It would be a pity, Doña Juanita reflected, to start married life with another woman and one so really lovely — even Esteban's mother could see how unusually attractive this Madame de Segovia was — in the middle distance of the picture. She marveled Lady Susan did not see that for herself. But these English girls were certainly odd in many ways. At once too trusting and too indifferent, it appeared to her. All very well for the unattached young men of the

family to entertain such gypsies — but not the more solid members. Above all not the young married people. Heaven knew the men's fatal tendency to slip all too soon from the safe paths of domestic rectitude.

Meanwhile, as all these thoughts went spinning in her head, José was saying good-humoredly that it was a great pity Esteban had not been with them to enjoy so notable an occasion. 'Too bad he should have had to remain in Paris all this week.'

Again his mother shrugged her thin shoulders under their elegant brocade wrap. 'But we may hear some very pleasant news by the end of the week, José. And you know Esteban is not really musical.'

Lady Mary said: 'The most unmusical person must have enjoyed this Carmen, my dear Nita,' as for the last time that evening the graceful curtsying figure on the other side of the footlights faced the still wildly applauding house alone on the great, empty stage below them. Then the heavy curtain descended and shut it away for the last time.

Lady Mary, like a good many other people there, emitted a gusty sigh and said regretfully, 'Well, that's all over.'

Then she turned her mind to other, more mundane affairs.

'We must get away — come along, all of you,' she commanded briskly; 'we've simply got to keep moving. There are at least two dances at which we must put in an appearance, as well as the Foreign Office reception. Alistair' — she turned to the silent young man who had earlier fetched Doña Juanita's cloak — 'where's my bearskin? Thank goodness there'll be supper at all

three places. All this excitement has made me fearfully hungry.'

Dragging on the really beautiful wrap he brought her, in the careless way so characteristic of her, she led the way, talking loudly, as was her habit, to the vestibule, where she and her party became temporarily engulfed in a surging human sea. Scraps of talk floated above the general high, confused noise of many voices:

'A Spaniard — yes.'

'Found in a French music-hall, so Tom says.'

'I am sure I heard her sing at some restaurant at Fontainebleau — gypsy songs, only last summer.'

'Do you hear?' whispered Susan Kingsford to her fiancé.

José de Premijoy laughed. 'I don't suppose there's a word of truth in it, Suzette. Nicolini is too old a bird to allow his protégées to appear in public before the right moment.'

Lady Mary, wedged in amongst a crowd of people waiting for their carriages, said plaintively: 'It will take years to get out of this.'

Doña Juanita, who had been born a natural kill-joy, could not resist improving the occasion. She disliked crowds intensely and considered that Lady Mary had missed her opportunity to get away comfortably by insisting on waiting to see the last of the new Carmen. The impulsive action of a schoolgirl, thought Doña Juanita.

'That is the worst of trying to get away from Covent Garden on a night like this,' she remarked tartly. 'Now if we had started the moment the curtain fell, we should have escaped all this.'

'But we should have missed half the fun,' returned Lady Mary firmly. Suddenly in the maelstrom she espied a face she knew.

'What on earth are you doing here, Bojer Nordstrom?' she shouted. 'Did you come to scoff at a rival's find — and then have to stay and pray the Lord to do as well by you? Come here, Bojer, at once, and tell me all the gossip about her. What a marvelous voice! and the girl can act, too! What do you know about this de Segovia? Where do you imagine Nicolini picked her up?'

With difficulty Bojer Nordstrom, a lean, fair, gray-eyed Scandinavian, made the best of his way to Lady Mary through the crowd. He bowed over her extended hand, now guiltless of any covering.

'Where did Nicolini pick her up?' he repeated. 'Probably in the streets of Seville. I hear she is authentic Spanish. But she is very much shrouded in mystery still. Certainly our indefatigable Salvatore has put one over on us this time. I for one hadn't the slightest notion what he was springing on us when the curtain rose this evening.'

José de Premijoy, who also numbered him amongst his acquaintance, laid a hand on his shoulder.

'I suppose it wouldn't be possible to go behind there and make the diva our compliments. My fiancée, Lady Susan Kingsford' — he introduced Bojer to her punctiliously — 'is very anxious to meet her ——'

Said Lady Susan impulsively: 'I don't know when I've been so charmed and thrilled. I'd love to tell her so.'

For a long moment the younger *impresario* hesitated

— he knew only too well how Nicolini detested being rushed — then, governed himself by a lively curiosity, he replied: 'Why not? I'll take you round with pleasure. If you and the ladies do not mind the general dust and confusion of behind the scenes. On a nearer view the back-stage part of a theater is rather disillusioning, you know.'

To this warning, however, there was at once raised a clamorous assurance that of all things Lady Mary and her party doted on that part of the playhouse which is behind the curtain.

'It's all so quaint!' explained Lady Susan; 'just like a fairy tale.'

Smiling a trifle grimly, Bojer reflected it was at times much more like a nightmare; but, thus reassured, he at once led the way to those regions, in which he, at least, was very much at home. He did not want to risk arriving too late for an interview with the new star, however short. A refusal from Nicolini to introduce his prima donna to these friends of his would be very humiliating. Luckily he was aware of his colleague's weakness for a title — and on this Bojer was really banking. When Nicolini knew who these people were, he would find it hard to refuse them five minutes with Madame de Segovia. Especially now when he was at the beginning of things with her. He always liked his artists to be popular socially whenever it was possible.

To Nina, therefore, sitting before the wide mirror in her dressing-room, slightly dazed with the night's amazing events, surrounded by masses of flowers which even overflowed into the passage outside, the last congratulatory stranger, as she supposed, finally bowed

out, there presently appeared yet another group of well-dressed, carelessly exclaiming, charmingly complimentary people. There seemed no end to these musical enthusiasts.

Said Salvatore, returning from a hurried conference in the whitewashed passage, to her new dresser, Emilia, at the door, opened just a crack to permit of the colloquy: 'Tell Madame de Segovia that I should take it as a personal favor if she would be so amiable as to give five minutes — no more, I promise her — to an old friend of mine, Bojer Nordstrom, who is venturing to bring some guests of his to congratulate Madame personally on her wonderful performance.'

Nina, listening wearily, sighed, then called out: 'Have I not seen enough people yet, Salvatore? You make me feel like a monkey. But I suppose they must come in. Only I am in my petticoat now. And I'm so tired I don't know whether I'm asleep or awake. Don't expect me to be witty. I'm likely to talk the greatest nonsense.'

Catching up a vivid orange dressing-jacket, she flung it over her lace petticoat, took a final look at herself in the glass, and bade the plump Emilia — 'Send 'em all in.'

So that the first impression they received, as they followed Nicolini into the dressing-room, was one of a background of brilliant lights before which a slim figure wrapped in a bird-embroidered silk coat, with a mass of cloudy dark hair tumbling about her shoulders, and two great eyes, stood regarding them half shyly, half mischievously.

Bojer, at Salvatore's elbow, made his own bow and

neat speech and then most skillfully his introductions, which Doña Juanita, receding determinedly more and more into the background, managed to escape. Increasingly irritated at having to waste her time on such a mission, she had no mind to be formally made known to a mere professional person, however talented. And, perceiving thankfully that Lady Mary had instantly plunged into a dissertation on all the Carmens she could remember, coupled with a flowery complimenting of Nina on her recent exertions, which seemed to fill the room with reverberating sound, she slipped yet farther into a distant corner.

Lady Mary was bringing her peroration to a close: 'You and Emma Calvé are the two greatest of them all.'

Again the room became full of gay chatter.

Nina laughed, and spread her hands in a prettily deprecating gesture. 'I still have so much to learn,' she confessed. 'But you certainly say the most delightful things, Madame. And I am so much obliged to you. It is all a little confusing, as yet. Every one has overwhelmed me with kindness.'

Lady Susan, with her candid eyes on Nina's face, said softly: 'It must be wonderful to be able to sing as you do.'

And Nina, perceiving her to be a friendly spirit, of her own age, probably, turned to her at once: 'I am so glad I pleased you,' she said. 'But it's hard work, you know.'

'And is this your first visit to London?' asked Lady Mary curiously. The girl was certainly unaffected and charming: probably did not yet realize what her success meant.

Nina admitted at once that it was, and added that so far she had seen little or nothing of Britain's capital city beyond her expensive hotel in the Haymarket and those streets which led directly from it to Covent Garden.

This was too good an opportunity for José de Premijoy to miss. Therefore, seizing this opening, which appeared Heaven-sent, he said quickly: 'I suppose you have heaps of friends here and engagements already, Madame de Segovia?'

Nina, attracted to this humorous-looking young man because he had been Esteban's great friend, shook her head and laughed again. 'No, no; I don't know a soul here, except Signor Nicolini and Madame Gebirge.'

José, screwing his glass into his eye, continued firmly: 'But that state of affairs must be remedied immediately. Would you not come to lunch with my fiancée, Lady Susan, and me one day, then? We should both be too flattered if you would, *chère* Madame. And afterwards, if you cared to, we would drive you to Hurlingham or Ranelagh for tea — the polo at either club is generally worth watching.'

The dispatch with which he had got out his invitation amused Lady Susan even while she warmly seconded it. The ice broken, Lady Mary joined in with an invitation on her own account, in which she was clever enough to include both Nicolini and Bojer.

Nina looked at them all undecidedly. Then, very much drawn to this pretty English girl who was to marry Esteban's friend — though she had never met him till this moment, and therefore trusted he would not connect her with Esteban — she determined to take the risk of becoming better acquainted with this

group of pleasant people who probably moved daily in those circles wherein he had always played so popular a part. A faint amusement stirring in her, she thought — we shall see if they find me flashy and a mere circus clown. She therefore paid not the slightest attention to Salvatore's raised and warning eyebrows, and accepted both invitations with perfect amiability.

Lady Mary was so delighted she almost purred like a cat, and José, seeing that they were all sitting so pretty, born organizer that he was, at once had the days, the hours, and the places all arranged before the moment for leaving should arrive. This caused a very animated babel to continue for some moments. Meanwhile, Lady Mary was looking vaguely about her for Doña Juanita. Knowing her as she did, she feared her old friend would be in no good humor at having been rather left out in the cold, though how it had come about she had not the slightest idea.

'Where are you, Nita?' she therefore called, peering short-sightedly into the one corner which seemed partially cut off from the rest of the room by a high screen of Spanish leather and several large opened trunks. But still determined to steer clear of all conversation with Nina which might entail future recognition of one whose profession she so heartily mistrusted and misprized, Doña Juanita affected not to hear Lady Mary's voice. And when she realized that her friend was about to call to her again, and probably more insistently, she pushed the end of the screen away from the wall and slipped quickly behind it.

Luckily for her, Lady Mary's attention was claimed then by Bojer Nordstrom, and Doña Juanita was thus

enabled to remain *perdue*. After an instant she began to look curiously about her.

She found that she was almost backing onto an improvised couch of three chairs, on which pillows and rugs had been laid. Amongst these, as in a nest, cozily wrapped in a blue silk quilt, a little boy lay asleep. He seemed to be, in the half-light of the place, a handsome little fellow, of some three or four years of age, probably. Sturdy and well-grown, he lay in the easy sleep of childhood, long curling lashes touching lightly a flushed cheek. In his arms tightly clasped was a very battered teddy-bear.

Doña Juanita considered the little sleeper with a frowning intentness, a faintly scornful smile on her face. So — she supposed — this must be the singer's young child. Doña Juanita, still scornfully smiling, opined the father was negligible. Imagine her dragging it to the theater of a night, too. Well, well, one knew what these gypsies were.

All the time she was studying the child's features. She had a singular feeling that there was something familiar about him, which, of course, was quite absurd. She was in the middle of thanking her Maker that she was not as these lax theatrical folk when some slight movement on her part disturbed the little chap. And he opened a pair of dark blue eyes and smiled lazily at her.

Doña Juanita felt quite weak and faint. '*Dios!*' she murmured, 'it's Esteban again.'

Wildly she looked about her — then, pulling herself together, she put a warning finger to her lips and bent over him.

'Who are you — and what is your name?' she whispered imperiously.

The baby continued to look up at her in silence. On the other side of the screen she could hear them all beginning to say good-bye to Nina. Furious with herself and fate, Doña Juanita more than ever wished she had not come behind the screen. But she must at least find out the child's name.

'What are you called?' she asked him again hastily.

'Ramon ——' he said, in a clear flutelike little voice; so like that one which had been Esteban's years before. There was no doubt of it in her mind — this Madame de Segovia must be the circus waif who had bewitched her son some six years ago. How often had she prayed Heaven that the jade might drop back into the same impossible life from which Esteban had so foolishly taken her, and never cross their paths again! She had even burnt candles — on more than one occasion. And now here she was — a great singer. Even Doña Juanita had to concede that. And more than likely to meet Esteban any day, and ensnare him freshly. This time, too, it would be forever. Doña Juanita knew that. *Ay de mí!*

With a last backward glance at the child she knew in her heart to be her grandson, she slipped back, white-faced and tight-lipped, to the other side of the heavy screen again. Her mind already at work as to how best to meet this new shuffling of the cards of destiny, she hurried out into the passage, where Lady Mary found her a few moments after, leaning against the wall, complaining of faintness and a strange dizzy feeling in her head.

2

Curiously enough, Ramon did not speak of the strange lady who had waked him up, as he fancied, just to ask his name. At all times wrapped up in his own little concerns, he was accustomed to meeting so many strangers at such weird hours and in such odd ways that he promptly forgot all about the incident. Thus Nina was neither aware that Doña Juanita had been one of her visitors, nor that she had made the discovery that Ramon was Esteban's little son. Once again, therefore, Nina was at a disadvantage in dealing with her most subtle enemy and did not know it. Nor was Doña Juanita one to let such an advantage slip. For the time being, however, she was content to let things drift and events shape themselves. For Esteban was still in Paris amusing himself; and a couple of days later she learned from the newspapers that Madame de Segovia could sing Carmen at Covent Garden only a half-dozen more times. It appeared that Nicolini had booked her for a tour in South America early in the autumn and she must return to France to add Delilah and Thaïs to her répertoire.

'A half-dozen appearances,' mused Doña Juanita; 'at the rate of two a week she can be here only three weeks longer. That will bring us to the middle of July. I shall encourage Esteban to return to Madrid and then urge him to go to Ronda for some time.'

But as so often happens with the schemes of mice and men, that unseen hand now began to move the pieces on the board, and the game in consequence took on unexpectedly complicated aspects.

It all began upon that morning on which, a week

later, it had been arranged that Nina was to lunch with Lady Susan Kingsford and José in the great old-fashioned house in Cavendish Square wherein since her mother's death Lady Susan had kept house for her taciturn and book-loving father, the Earl of Kilbrenan. That morning Salvatore most unexpectedly invited himself to breakfast with Nina.

The night before she had sung Carmen for the third time to a packed and vociferous house and was, in consequence, in the highest spirits. Moreover, though nobody but herself knew it then, she had — on the advice and with the help of Manja Gebirge, whose circle of acquaintance was in England, as in every other country she had ever visited, singularly wide and eclectic — decided on a new home for Ramon: one where, in due course, he would acquire that first difficult foundation of knowledge on which would be built the superstructure of his school-days later on. This establishment being in the depths of the country, Nina had spent a whole day with Miss Sylvia and Miss Daphne Knox, who so providentially appeared to be clamoring to take complete charge of a small boy, in order to become better acquainted with them and explain exactly what she wanted Ramon to grow into. She found the Misses Knox delightful, and their house as pretty as a picture. Elderly and unmarried they might be, endowed by Heaven with plain faces and by the local bootmaker with large and thick boots — they were great walkers, it seemed; but one look told Nina that here Ramon would have a real home and the most tender care, and yet be brought up with all that excellent discipline she had so hoped he might encounter if only she could find

the right environment for him. Attracted by her beauty as plain women so often are, and very sympathetic, once she had explained her problem to them, they had at once pledged themselves to look on Ramon as their own.

'But we must not spoil him, Daphne,' said Miss Sylvia.

They did not need to assure Nina that in leaving him to their care she could also leave all anxiety about his welfare and health with them as well.

It was immediately settled that he was to come to Cedarhurst in the early autumn. Nina would bring him to the pretty Worcestershire village herself before she sailed for South America. Meanwhile, she left Miss Daphne and Miss Sylvia with a photograph apiece. That anxiety off her mind, she was going to enjoy the rest of the summer with Ramon and forget for the time being that at the end of it she must part with him for nearly two years. But, having decided after much meditation that no other course would be as wise as this, she made up her mind to allow nothing to turn her from her purpose. When he grew up, if she could anyway compass it, Ramon was going to be a boy any one might be proud of. Well-educated, careless, courageous, and, above all, good-humored. So far, however, she had not broken the news to the little fellow. Why make him unhappy before she had to? Though she knew him well enough, baby though he still was, to be sure that when the moment came he would accept his new lot docilely and bravely. Already for the last year she had accustomed him to the notion that sooner or later he would have to go cheerfully amongst stran-

gers for a good part of the time while she was away earning the money to keep them both. Therefore it was no new idea to the child. But she saw no reason to cast any shadow of coming separation over his present contentment with life. She would keep him with her as much as was possible from now on, and see that his memories of this summer were entirely happy ones.

At the moment she had sent him out with Emilia, who had already become passionately attached to him, to take his usual morning walk in Saint James's Park. He loved feeding the ducks and the gulls on the ornamental water.

When Salvatore arrived round ten o'clock, Nina was sitting at the writing-table in the window of her sitting-room, scribbling a long and gossipy letter to Pierre Chanel. Salvatore came in, arrayed in a brand-new suit of a light gray shade and an air of stern resolve, though Nina, looking up, merely remarked the superlative elegance of his appearance.

'Too beautiful,' she murmured. 'An eyeful, Salvatore dear.'

Salvatore, carefully laying aside his hat — a new Homburg, also gray — and amber-headed cane, smiled abstractedly. For once he did not seem as genially care-free as was his habit. Then, perceiving that Nina was not attending to him at all, he allowed a yet deeper shade of gloom to settle on his shrewd features and crossed the room sedately. Coming over to her, he remained staring out of the open window beside her into the busy street below.

Without looking up, she said: 'Just let me finish this letter to Pierre. It ought to have been posted days ago.

He'll think me an ungrateful cat to keep him waiting so long for news of me — after all he's done for me and Ramon ——'

'I suppose you are very fond of him,' said Salvatore.

'Very,' returned Nina. Then she added: 'Ring the bell for breakfast, like a good soul.'

Still wrapped in a gloom which went not at all with the smartness and lightness of his attire, Salvatore obeyed her, then strode back to his first position in the window.

'Seen Manja Gebirge lately?' he asked.

'Not for three days, I think.'

Nina's busy pen scratched on for some minutes. Then she blotted the sheets filled with her rather unformed writing, pushed them into a large envelope, sealed, directed, and stamped it, and rose from her labors.

'I shall never make a good letter-writer,' she remarked. 'You know I think much quicker than I write, and when I read my effusions over they all seem very silly and dull. Luckily Pierre doesn't seem to find them so: which is soothing at least to my vanity. Now — he writes a most amusing letter. You wouldn't believe,' she finished with a sigh, 'how I miss that boy. I'm quite lost without him. And I don't really see how I am to learn Thaïs and that other lady of lax morals, Delilah — why are all mezzo-soprano parts ladies of little or no virtue: can only the soprano portray the guileless maiden? — unless he is there to help me. After all,' she continued after a pause, in which Salvatore merely grunted, 'after all, he taught me every note of Carmen. And you ought to know by this time, Salvatore, I'm no musician, and I need a lot of help.'

The waiter arriving at that precise instant with the breakfast stopped Nicolini from commenting on that remark of hers. Yet here, he reflected, might be a way out — little as he would relish it. But rather than risk losing his singer, he would endure Pierre, if he had to. However, when they were alone again and sitting at the round breakfast table in the center of the room, Nina's thought had drifted into another direction.

'*Dios!*' she cried, as she poured him out his coffee, 'is it possible that you have booked me up for two solid years, already? How did you do it?'

Thus carelessly did she allude, and even indifferently, to his having arranged with consummate art appearances for her in the chief opera houses of Europe and South America under his perspicacious management. That these appearances had involved endless delicate negotiations which he had only just brought to a satisfactory conclusion she evidently did not dream. Had his mind not been then full of worry concerning other matters, her prosaic attitude might have piqued him not a little. Salvatore was always inclined to be touchy about his organizing gifts. But now with this new and startling development as regards Doña Juanita looming up so alarmingly, he hardly heard what Nina said. He was wondering how best to say what must be said before he left the hotel.

'Yes ——' he answered absently.

Nina, handing him his coffee-cup, took no notice of his somber air. 'It appears that I have,' she went on gayly, 'as Pierre expresses it, very neatly done the trick and can now demand in consequence—or you can for me — again I quote the talented Monsieur Chanel — the

highest in price and location for my vocal gymnastics. And very satisfactory, too.'

'Yes ——' again he said.

This time she glanced at him quickly. 'What's biting you?' she demanded. 'Can't you use words of more than one syllable this morning? And now I come to think of it, you didn't do much vocalization last night.'

He stirred his coffee slowly, but he did not meet her smile, and she helped him to eggs and bacon in a puzzled silence.

'Toast and butter you can fish for, yourself,' she added as she brought the plate round to him and then went back to her own place. 'I'm sure there's something wrong,' she cried anxiously, after a pause in which Salvatore had cleared his throat twice and buried himself in his coffee-cup for a markedly lengthy period. 'You know you're not a bit like yourself this morning.'

Salvatore shook his head and began to attack his bacon and eggs with unnecessary ferocity. 'There's nothing exactly wrong yet,' he returned cautiously. 'But there is something I think you should know, Nina.'

Her mind instantly leaped to Ramon. 'There's nothing wrong with my little fellow?' she asked.

Now that he had the opening he had been looking for, Salvatore funked it.

'You think of nothing but that baby,' he returned evasively.

'Well, and why wouldn't I?' she shot back.

Salvatore decided to work the thing his own way. 'You're going to lunch to-day with José de Premijoy ——' he began.

'As a matter of fact, it's all been rearranged. I'm to

lunch in Cavendish Square — at Lady Susan's home.'

Nicolini waved his hand. 'But José will be there. Nina, I wish we had not got mixed up again with that set. It's going to be very difficult ——'

Said Nina slowly: 'I don't see how I could have refused their invitations. Lady Mary entertained me delightfully last Sunday. All her friends were charming to me ——'

'And I suppose you sang for them?'

Nina nodded. 'Why not? What is a gypsy song or two?'

'Did you know,' he demanded sharply, 'Doña Juanita was in that party that came to see you on your first night?'

If he had wanted to destroy her happy morning mood, he could not have hit on anything more calculated to disconcert her.

'Doña Juanita?' she repeated. 'Oh, not possible! That would be too unfortunate! Are you sure?'

'Sure.'

'And I didn't even see her. Where was she all the time?'

Again Salvatore hesitated. As he had had since the day before the best of reasons for knowing that Doña Juanita had penetrated on that unlucky occasion into places in which she had no kind of business to be, but did not wish to disturb Nina too much all at once, he did not answer this question then.

But as though following unconsciously his train of thought, Nina said: 'And Ramon was asleep behind that screen all the time.'

'Yes,' said Salvatore.

'Suppose she had looked behind and seen him?'

'She did,' said Salvatore.

Wide-eyed, Nina stared at him over the rim of her coffee-cup. 'Well?' she asked. Then added in a low tone: 'She hates me, that woman!'

This again gave him the opening he desired. 'Nina,' he said slowly, 'I wonder if you are wise to remain unmarried.'

This was such a glancing off at a tangent that Nina asked with a sudden laugh: 'Are you proposing to me, by any chance?'

Salvatore laughed, too, and shook an admonitory finger at her. 'No, no — I should be far too old for one so young and attractive as you, my dear.'

'But you might be very safe,' she pointed out mischievously.

'And very dull,' he pronounced, 'as most safe things are in this world. But I have been thinking that you do need a man, Nina, to take care of you. Some one who really possesses the right to stand between you and the world.'

Nina stirred her coffee thoughtfully. 'You make the prospect sound quite alluring,' she said. 'Only *au bout du compte* I haven't the slightest desire to tie myself up to any one. Most men become tyrants, once they are sure of you.' And her eyebrows went up. 'Why this wild desire to encircle me with a chain?'

Temporarily she appeared to have lost sight of the information he had just accorded her. And again Salvatore found himself at a disadvantage.

In the dramatic and, for him, agitated interview he had suffered so unexpectedly upon the previous after-

noon with Doña Juanita, she had made it disagreeably plain that hers was a council of war, not peace, and that Nina was on no account to learn that she had guessed Ramon to be her grandson. At the same time she made it crystal clear that unless Salvatore managed to get his star tied up in the bonds of matrimony — with whom was quite immaterial to Doña Juanita — with as little delay as possible, she would make it her business to render life particularly unpleasant for every one.

'I haven't the slightest intention of permitting her to cross my son's path again,' she said. 'Especially now — when he has at last become accustomed to the idea of taking a wife.'

Embarrassed and alarmed, too, over this unlooked-for crisis in his and Nina's affairs, Salvatore asked dubiously, 'But how can I force Madame de Segovia to rush into some ill-advised marriage?'

'The more ill-advised the better I shall be pleased,' was the uncompromising reply he received.

'A marriage which might ruin her career, irretrievably,' he continued irritably. 'Even if all you have been revealing to me of her past life is true' — for the life of him he could not resist registering strong skepticism — 'it is no business of mine. And let me tell you, Madame, Nina de Segovia is not to be driven. She has a mind of her own — she is not a girl without experience.'

'That I do not doubt.'

'And to make her take a husband if she did not want to would be a difficult undertaking, I should say. As well try to milk the ram.'

Doña Juanita broke in upon his homely simile im-

patiently, refusing to allow him to retain his carefully chosen rôle of innocent observer or adviser.

'Santa Maria!' she burst forth satirically, 'as if you hadn't influenced her in a thousand ways — probably in everything she did from the start. You cannot deny you were at San Remo the whole of that spring. Undoubtedly, now I come to reflect on it, Signor, you must have been at the bottom of her running away from Esteban, in the first place. For which handsome service I admit I owe you a debt of gratitude.'

'Then pray do not repay it by destroying my singer,' he retorted tartly. 'Rendering thereby useless the hard work of four years.'

Esteban's mother refused to debate the point. 'That she should desert him without warning hit my son at the time very hard. However, now, thank the Saints, he is cured of her at last. But see to it that you do continue to keep them apart.'

Sitting bolt upright on a chair in the sitting-room of his hotel suite, she laughed a thin, harsh laugh, openly gibing at his wretched air of indecision and distress.

'No need to look so guilty,' she continued; 'though you may not have known it at the time, you were doing me a service. As I said before, I owe you thanks for whatever you did to persuade her to vanish then. Manja Gebirge had as much to do with it, I am sure. It was a very pretty little conspiracy. So far Esteban has not put two and two together because he heard she was back with her old troupe in Paris last year. A clever move on your part, Signor. And so far he has not heard the girl sing ——'

Salvatore, to whom her information about Nina's

activities in Paris was not too welcome news, frowned.

'And need he?' he demanded. 'We leave London the week after next.'

Doña Juanita shrugged her shoulders. 'A week ago I should have said it was quite safe. I had hoped my son was not coming to England at all this summer. But, as you doubtless are aware, he is an inveterate polo player. And he arrived unexpectedly yesterday for some important polo matches.'

'*Maledetto!*' he swore softly. This was bad news indeed.

'Therefore, any evening,' continued Doña Juanita bitterly, 'he may go with some party of friends to the opera. And the chances are they will take him to hear Carmen. Because this girl is, as you know, the rage this season. I never go anywhere but I hear something said about her. And if he once recognized her, I think we can safely say there would be much unpleasantness for everybody.'

Salvatore remained silent for some seconds, turning the situation over in his mind. Then he remarked: 'But I understood you to say the young duke was getting married.'

There was marked hesitation before Doña Juanita answered coldly: 'But of course he is to be married, and to a very charming girl — but that has nothing to do with what I am talking about. I want Madame de Segovia absolutely out of the picture — when Esteban encounters her again. Now — we cannot be sure that they will not meet. The thing has grown too big — she is a great singer, the Segovia. I admit that.'

In his disturbance of soul, Salvatore began to march

up and down the room. 'Still I do not see how I can ——'

Doña Juanita leaned forward, a rasping tenseness in her voice as she declaimed passionately: 'In Spain, where I come from, one can still do things, Signor Nicolini. It is not so difficult to remove — difficulties from one's path. For my part, I should advise Madame to marry soon if she wishes to keep the child.'

It was this threat, which he really did not know whether he should take seriously or not, that had sent the worried man round to Nina, ostensibly to breakfast, on a morning already too full of important business for him to be able to spare the time at all comfortably. But he fancied he knew Doña Juanita. In a long life he had encountered women of her thoroughly unscrupulous type before. And he could very well imagine of what violent actions she might be capable if Nina, no matter how unconsciously, threatened to upset her plans for her son, not once alone, but a second time; and in less than seven years. Salvatore knew that his indefatigable mother had prevailed on the new Duque de Ventura to enter the diplomatic service of his country quite recently. The result of patient work over the last few years. Inch by inch she had pushed him into the position she desired him to occupy. And if all this castle-building toppled —— Something told Salvatore very surely that to remove Nina from her path, Doña Juanita would stop at very little. Only she would have to reckon now with Nina's manager and Nina's growing fame. Equally he became determined that she should not render his work useless for her own revengeful purposes.

'Yes, in Spain,' she repeated, staring at him inimi-

cally, 'one can still cause many things to be done. Difficulties' — she stressed the word malignantly — 'can be removed.'

Salvatore, coming to a stop before the grim-visaged terrorist, decided he must fling away the scabbard and take the field immediately. Doña Juanita must not have it all her own way.

'You mean to convey, then, Signora,' he said slowly, 'that your son is still in love with Madame de Segovia? That, if it is so, is likely to be a misfortune for all of us.'

But he was careful to avoid remarking that, as far as his own observation went, he was inclined to believe Nina still cared for Esteban.

Doña Juanita assumed a more belligerent aspect than before, if that were possible.

'In love! — that is a stupid word. He was merely bewitched by a pretty face, originally. Then he became disillusioned when he saw the common clay he had to deal with, as I expected. But young men so often view their past romances through a glamorous haze. And now that she is a famous personage, and in so short a time ——' His mother shrugged her shoulders. 'You must see for yourself anything might happen. But the Duque de Ventura cannot have his name associated with an opera singer, however successful.' Her voice was full of a delicate contempt.

Salvatore could not resist asking, 'Why not? It has been done before, you know.'

But, clever that she was, the next moment she had laid a firm finger squarely on Salvatore's secret fear.

'You would not care, I should imagine, to see your

diva decline into private life before she had made herself and you a fortune, Signor.'

From that moment Salvatore knew the situation to be really dangerous. He prayed earnestly that Esteban and Nina might not confront each other in the next fortnight. If only he could get Nina safely started on her South American trip! Well, well, perhaps Doña Juanita's solution might be the best after all. If the girl were safely married — it would be some kind of barrier, certainly. He might have known from the mere fact of her seeking him out that some such sword of Damocles impended overhead. To come to him was very unlike Doña Juanita. It would have to be some vital problem which would make her take so unconventional a step as to consult him, however acrimoniously and ungraciously.

'If we could only keep them apart till the autumn,' he said.

Doña Juanita rose. 'More than that. There must be a definite barrier. We cannot leave it to chance. My son is very proud, and I know him well enough to be certain that if he finds another man has taken his place — that will be the end of Madame Nina. He will never even speak to her again, no matter what pain he may suffer.'

After this there was a Delphic silence which Doña Juanita finally broke. 'Either you work with me, Signor Nicolini, or I shall take steps myself to remove her from my path,' she said resolutely. 'As I said before, in Spain one can still command and be obeyed. I take it one could strike at her very effectively through the child.'

'Your own flesh and blood, after all,' Salvatore dared to remind her.

'I do not recognize him.'

And on this openly threatening, sinister note, the unpleasant interview had terminated. Since then the sorely pressed Salvatore had not breathed freely. Too well he knew that, if anything happened to Ramon, his mother would never sing again.

Therefore, when Nina demanded to know why she should encircle herself with a chain, he replied earnestly: 'A woman alone is always at a disadvantage, for one thing. Especially when she is young and as much in the public eye as you are. Don't pretend, my dear Nina, that you do not know how the male pursues ——'

Nina began to laugh. 'I have always found it rather amusing,' she confessed.

'Then again for Ramon — it might be better,' he suggested cautiously.

Perhaps it was some anxiety in his voice, or an expression in his face, but Nina took alarm.

'Did she recognize Ramon that night?' she demanded peremptorily, much to Salvatore's discomfort. 'The child is the image of his father.'

He stared at her — hardly knowing what to say.

'My dear Nina, how should I know?' He took refuge in the lie. 'But from many points of view, now that Doña Juanita has linked you definitely with her son ——'

Nina nodded. 'Yes, that woman hates me. She came between us at San Remo — oh, very cleverly. I should never be surprised at anything she might do. I wish to Heaven she had never seen Ramon.'

All the time she was speaking she was covertly watching Salvatore. Could he be withholding information

from her? That she could not quite decide. She began to think rapidly.

'You need not say another word!' she cried. 'We will run no risks. I will take Ramon away this afternoon ——'

'*Dio!* — but where?'

Nina looked amused. 'I shall not tell you that,' she said. 'Probably it will be just as well you shouldn't know.'

And, recognizing with untold relief that such action on her part would certainly render any plan of Doña Juanita's for the time being abortive, Salvatore left the hotel soon after, much more cheerfully than he had entered it. It was thus that the astonished Misses Knox very willingly received for the next ten days a small but most entertaining visitor that afternoon. And why Lady Susan became the recipient of an apologetic telegram during the morning from a much-distressed Nina, announcing that suddenly urgent business had called her away into the country for the day.

Displaying the disappointing wire dejectedly to a very indifferent Esteban, who, with José, was smoking in the library, she had to admit that he had been right after all.

'And so you will not meet the new Carmen.'

Said Esteban, looking at her quizzically: '*La madre* informs me that already she has a reputation for not keeping her social engagements. My dear Suzette, it is the way of all these theatrical folk. They have little consideration and less manners.'

Lady Susan, sighing, admitted he might be right; then left the telegram on the table and forgot all about

it, going about the business of rearranging her luncheon table immediately.

Just before he left for the polo match in which he was scheduled to play that afternoon at Ranelagh, Esteban returned to the library to write a note. Nina's telegram still lay opened on the blotter. Esteban sat down and chose himself a sheet of paper from the Florentine leather rack. Then his eye fell on the wire.

'So terribly sorry,' he read aloud and smiling cynically, 'impossible to come lunch to-day. Urgent business calls me into the country. De Segovia.'

Said Esteban, crumpling it up and throwing it into the waste-basket: 'I'll bet it's all on account of a man.'

In which conclusion, to a certain extent, he was right.

Nina, meanwhile, had made up her mind to remove herself from London, too.

'I'll bury myself in some quiet little place in the country — and only come up to sing Carmen. Salvatore or Manja will know of some place. But I'd better keep out of the way for a bit, I believe. And I'd certainly better not see any more of those friends of Doña Juanita's. I don't want a smash-up at the beginning of my career.'

Very sensibly resolved; but again — man plans and Providence wills. And, furthermore, as the Chinese proverb has it: 'It is not well to lift the foot before the stile is reached.'

3

On the advice of Salvatore, Nina betook herself to a tiny river hotel or inn near Marlow on the Thames. The village being a small one and off the railway line, he

fancied she would be secure from any disagreeable incursions. Again on his advice, she left no address, resigning to him all explanations for such odd conduct in thus disappearing from view at the height of the London season. But great singers, as he pointed out to her, can dare to be eccentric. And after all, she had but four more appearances at Covent Garden before her and about ten more days in England. So short a period should pass peacefully.

Good-naturedly Manja Gebirge journeyed down from town to visit the recluse one hot July morning. 'Well, well,' she shouted as soon as the conveyance which had driven her five miles into the back country stopped before the inn door, and she saw Nina standing in the cooler spaces of the oak-beamed hall, ready to welcome her. 'So you're rusticating with a vengeance, Ninetta. All by yourself — with nothing to do all day but dream, eh?'

She descended from the groaning vehicle and paid the perspiring driver. 'And here's a florin for a good lunch,' she said, 'or, better still, beer, bread, and cheese.'

Nina in a lace frock and shady hat took her out through the house, which seemed completely empty at the moment, onto a long tree-bordered lawn, beyond which she could see the river flowing peacefully between its green banks.

Almost immediately Manja began to impart to her the latest gossip. 'You're so out of the world here,' she said; 'can you bear it, Nina?'

'It's splendid for the voice, at least.'

The evasive reply made Madame Gebirge chuckle.

'It might have been Salvatore speaking,' she re-

marked. 'By the way, did you know José's wedding is fixed for the last week in July? Shall you be there?'

Nina shook her head. 'I should be back in Paris by then, if nothing unforeseen occurs.'

After a moment Manja continued: 'That very trying woman, Doña Juanita, wants me to sing at some affair she is giving next week.' Nina did not reply, and after throwing her a quick look, Manja continued: 'Did you know her son was in England?'

'No — why has he come here?' Nina's tone was very troubled.

'Polo mainly, I think.' Madame Gebirge's air was almost too careless.

Nina sighed. After a moment she asked in a low voice, 'Where is Esteban?'

'In London. Perhaps I ought to tell you that he was at a luncheon party at Lady Mary's yesterday — I was there. He seemed full of life and far more conversational than he used to be.'

Nina looked quite frightened. '*Dios!* and he may even come to Covent Garden to hear me sing. There are still two more Carmen performances.'

'His mother will do her best to prevent that.'

'Oh dear! how difficult life is!' said Nina. Then she changed the subject deliberately. 'Don't you think it's lovely down here?'

Manja made a face. 'I never was one for a country life. And all alone, too.'

Nina laughed. 'But I'm not alone, as it happens,' she said.

'Not alone?'

'No.'

Manja began to look about her curiously. 'Well, who's the man?' she demanded.

'Need he be a man?'

'Ramon is not here?'

'No.'

By this time they had sauntered across the broad stretch of green grass and had passed through a little gate into a wide towing-path. Beside them in the sunshine the river ran placidly, streaked here and there with long green weeds. It was all very sylvan and peaceful.

'Well, then, who's making life tolerable for you in this out-of-the-way neck of the woods?' asked Manja.

'Pierre,' answered Nina. 'He arrived a couple of days ago, much to my astonishment. And we are already hard at work on Delilah. That was a heartless jade, if you like. She behaved shockingly to poor Samson.'

'Salvatore's doing, of course.'

Manja passed over the question of Delilah's morals; ignoring Nina's comment.

Nina nodded.

'But I thought ——'

'And so did I,' she returned indifferently. 'I quite imagined Salvatore had given Pierre his marching orders — for the time being, at all events — as far as I was concerned. It's quite useless for him to pretend to like Pierre. But it turns out that we were mistaken.'

Along the path there now could be seen advancing, still at some distance, a tall athletic figure.

'Hoo-hoo!' cried Nina, and waved her parasol. 'There he is, now.'

The advancing, hatless, and breeze-blown figure

semaphored back violently, shouting at the same time something which they could not entirely hear.

'What energy he has!' screamed Manja, and she swished round and round her head in response a vivid red sunshade with equal violence. 'But I wonder,' she added in a much lower tone, 'Salvatore allows you to be so unconventional as to be alone with him here — as things are. Once it got put about — your reputation would not be exactly classical, shall we say.'

'Who is there to see us in this silly place?' asked Nina; adding slowly, 'I have an idea Salvatore wants me to marry Pierre.'

Manja cast upon her a sidelong, watchful glance, full of unspoken questioning. Then, 'A very good notion, too,' she cried warmly. 'He's devoted to you, a fine musician ——'

'All a help, isn't it?'

'And an excellent young man in every way.'

'I know,' said Nina soberly.

But, Pierre Chanel arriving at this point within speaking distance, Manja could not then further pursue a subject which was of so much secret interest to her.

Nina called gayly to him: 'Did you get the piano-tuner, kind sir?'

It appeared, after he had greeted the exuberant Manja with his usual cheerful friendliness, that he had.

'Though he found it hard to understand my English,' he reported. 'And to acquire this talented person's services I had to travel as far afield as Maidenhead. That's why I've been gone all the morning. However, he will be here after lunch, and do his best or worst with that tinkling affair in the hotel they miscall a piano.'

Nina slipped her arm through his as they turned to walk back to the George Inn.

'But, *Dieu!*' he continued, smiling down at her. 'What music they keep in their shops here! All very saccharine — indeed, several times sweeter than cane sugar — and such popular songs. I could compose half a dozen a day of such stuff. Decidedly, this nation is not too musical.'

Manja Gebirge, marching steadily on his right hand — very ready for her lunch — opined music *per se* mainly belonged to the Teutonic race. 'Religion, sausages, and music — those are ours preëminently.'

Before long she and Pierre were involved in one of their endless, hotly debated arguments on these points.

'I'll concede you the sausages,' said Pierre.

'You cannot rob us of Beethoven,' heatedly pointed out Manja.

'More than likely he was a Dutchman,' teased Pierre.

Nina, walking meditatively beside the disputants, did not attend much to a discussion she had heard many times before. Under her breath she began to hum an aria from the Saint-Saëns opera she was studying, while she speculated at the same time very seriously as to whether she would refuse or accept Pierre whenever he did pluck up sufficient courage to propose to her. In fact, throughout the luncheon which followed, she was unusually silent, casting such markedly excogitative looks on Pierre that finally he demanded to know what was wrong about his appearance.

'Hair can't be getting thin, yet,' he remarked.

'There's nothing wrong with you,' returned Nina. 'I love you in flannels, dear Monsieur Chanel. They suit you so well.'

Pierre rose from his seat to bow. 'Only don't regard me so coldly, then, dear Madame de Segovia. Permit now and then a gleam of admiration to appear. So pondering a glance flutters me and makes me fear you have at the back of that nimble brain of yours some terrible design on me.'

Assuming immediately a theatrically coquettish and Carmen-like air, Nina retorted: 'Perhaps I have. I feel for some reason in a very predatory mood to-day. All claws and teeth.'

'She might even marry you before you knew it,' suggested Manja, with one of her great laughs.

Pierre flushed a little. 'But that would have its compensations, Manja,' he smiled, and Nina blew him a kiss.

The pleasantly indolent afternoon they all spent subsequently on the river still found Nina's mind nibbling at the idea.

'Would it ruin Pierre's career if he got married?' she asked suddenly, after a long silence, while that energetic young man rowed them easily downstream.

Manja, lounging beside her on the cushions of the broad stern seat, declared with emphasis that provided he chose the right kind of wife it would probably make him.

'Well, what would be the right kind of wife?'

Pierre himself supplied the information promptly: 'Some one who would not mind my vagaries. I can be very trying, you know.'

'That doesn't sound at all hard.'

Thus encouraged, he offered to catalogue on the spot his virtues as well as his vices. 'Of which really I have

few,' he explained. 'But it may make it easier for you both in picking me out a life companion — a perfect soul mate.'

Gravely Manja contemplated his six feet of easy masculinity. 'You are a constant challenge to the female,' she observed. 'If I were only ten years younger — better say twenty, but keep that to yourselves, children — I should certainly enter the race. I believe you'd make a very pleasant husband on the whole. More good days than bad with you, probably.'

Pierre as gravely returned: 'If I were not busy sculling at the moment, I should kiss your little white hand, Manja. But the fact is, you're a sad flatterer. However, go on talking about me. Men are naturally vain and love to hear themselves discussed by sympathetic friends.'

'Suppose,' suggested Nina, 'after he was married he fell in love with another woman.'

'It's often done,' said Manja.

Pierre began to laugh. 'I can assure you, Ninetta' — he looked at her quizzically — 'my wife would never know it.'

'You wouldn't be horrid to the poor thing — because of your guilty conscience?'

'Certainly not.'

'Husbands so often fall in love with other people after they've been married about ten years,' she murmured.

'If they ever get that far. Marriage,' boomed out Madame Gebirge, dabbling her fingers in the water over the side of the boat and rather as if she had made an entirely new discovery, 'is a great lottery.'

This tremendous thought caused Nina and Pierre to laugh with great heartiness.

'Not so,' said they.

'I,' continued the famous singer, declaiming dramatically, 'have dipped in the lucky bag, you might say, no less than three times. To say nothing of those romantic and tenderly sentimental affairs I indulged in when a young and slim girl. Yes, as slim, Nina dearest, as you.'

She paused here to take breath, also possibly to review the subject of thought then on the *tapis*.

'Well?' asked Pierre.

Manja stared at him fixedly. 'What do you mean by — well?' she demanded.

'What luck?' he inquired.

'In the matter of husbands — none,' she asserted negligently. 'They were all snakes — not one eel.'

'Too bad,' cried Nina sympathetically.

Since the subject of husbands in general was up for discussion, Manja proceeded to an account of each spouse in particular.

'My sad story may act as a warning,' she said. 'Alexis drank like a fish — he had beautiful blue eyes, but he drank; that I could have stood, however, if he had not insisted on throwing the dinner-plates at my head. Russians are a hasty, morbid race. With them it is a word or a plate — generally an expensive one — at your head.'

'Had he a good aim?' questioned Nina lazily.

'Very chancy,' returned Manja. 'I had to dodge flying missiles a good part of the day, sometimes. Not much finally remained intact in our apartment. And it interfered terribly with my singing. On the stage was

the only place where I was really safe. So, all things considered, I decided to divorce him. That he was very agreeable about — quite friendly.'

'Exit number one,' said Pierre. 'My poor Manja, this is all news to me. I feel I must condole with you on your rotten luck. But I can promise you I shan't throw plates at my wife's head.' And he looked at Nina and smiled.

'That's such a relief to know, Pierre dear,' said she. 'Go on, Manja, tell about the other two.'

The good-natured woman continued robustly: 'My second — who is dead now, poor fellow — was of an altogether different type, he was of my own nation, artistic, inclined to be stoutly long-haired, if you know what I mean — and thought he knew a whole lot more about singing than I did. He certainly had a nice, thin, reedy little tenor,' and she proceeded to give a most faithful imitation of the same. 'But it was not the slightest use in grand opera — why, the flutes drowned him. So it made him very wretched, and he felt the whole world was against him. Also he hated my laugh ——'

'Oh, why?' asked Nina.

'Poor Fritz — he always declared it was not the laugh of a lady. But then I never imagined myself to be such a thing. It wouldn't have done me much good to be one when I was young; not in the world I lived in. But I can't tell you how often he would excite himself about it. He would cry in the most pained tones' — here she imitated the deceased critic obviously most faithfully — '*Herr Gott, lieber Schatz*, can't you *cultivate* a laugh? I told him I'd far rather he cultivated Christian resignation. But, being a Prussian, of course it was

asking too much of him. So, one fine day he bothered me for the last time about my laugh — and I was off on a South American tour.'

Pierre inquired what happened to the deserted creature then. Manja shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, he got a divorce, and little I cared, and married again almost at once some perfect lady — all my husbands did that, married again. I hardly knew whether to look on it as a compliment or an insult. Then he died of influenza in Berlin one winter. So I suppose I might say I'd been a widow ——' she added this in rather an astonished tone, as though the idea had but just occurred to her.

Pierre, now looking at his watch, announced it was time they landed somewhere and went wandering over the countryside for tea.

'But I must hear about Manja's third venture,' cried Nina. 'I am learning a lot about the habits of husbands.'

Continued Manja amiably: 'He won't take long, that one. He was a Greek — a *basso profundo — tief stimme* — and he was called Ulysses Stepanopoulos. What I ever took up with him for, I don't know to this day. And if Ulysses means a hater — why, he certainly lived up to the name. He ended by hating everything about me. Personally, as I told him, I never could bear his pale olive complexion. And then he had such black eyes, and most of the day he seemed to be shaving ——'

'He sounds horrid,' said Nina.

'He was all of that,' returned the late Madame Stepanopoulos briskly. 'And he was altogether too fond of wine, women, and song. Only it wasn't my song, you understand, that attracted him for any length of time.

Well' — she furled her scarlet banner with decision as Pierre ran the boat alongside the river-bank, where a group of villa-like houses in gardens that ran down to the water's edge, added to an insecure-looking plank wharf, proclaimed the near presence of some small village — 'so it goes with matrimony for most of us. I say — enjoy the day. At present I am at liberty.' Aided by Pierre, she climbed heavily out of the boat, which lurched ominously. 'And if you know of any really nice man — not too youthful and inexperienced in marriage — you might send him along.' And she stumped away, opening her sunshade determinedly again.

But of such a character both Nina and Pierre at once hastened to announce complete ignorance. 'We would not dare to be responsible for a fourth venture,' they explained.

'That's right; don't you take on any such responsibility, is my advice to you,' called Madame Gebirge over her shoulder as the two followed her up the road giggling light-heartedly.

'I wonder she never tried Salvatore,' said Pierre.

'He was too wily,' whispered Nina. 'He says being married once was enough for him.'

'And very cryptic, too.'

4

After dinner in the private sitting-room Salvatore had insisted on engaging for her — the piano having been meanwhile to a limited extent improved during their absence in the afternoon by the local tuner whom Pierre had interviewed — Nina sang for them both.

A small launch chugging its way upstream in the

balmy moonlit summer night came to a rest by the landing-place at the end of the George Inn lawn.

'Listen!' cried Lady Mary Fleetwood excitedly. 'I believe that's De Segovia singing. What a lark if we've run her to earth! Nicolini was so mysterious about her yesterday when I asked him where she'd gone so suddenly and why.'

From the depths of a cushioned seat beside her, the voice of José de Premijoy muttered: 'Bet you a sovereign it's only Manja Gebirge.'

'Only!' cried Lady Susan. 'Hear him, ye gods!'

'You can't say her voice is in its first freshness, Suzette. Though she's a great artist still — I concede that.'

'Besides,' continued Lady Susan, 'what would bring Madame de Segovia down here? A foreigner in such an out-of-the-way place.'

Some one hidden in another deeply cushioned seat beyond the one in which Lady Mary sat listening intently suggested carelessly: 'A love affair, perhaps.'

'The boy is right,' she announced as the song came to an end — Schumann at his best; 'that's certainly dear old Manja. Perhaps her voice is not in its first bloom, but I must confess I still would go a long way to hear her.'

'We have already come a long way,' patiently suggested the voice at her elbow.

'What's she doing down here?' demanded José of the night and the river, for certainly no one in the launch knew. 'She's like a very massive will-o'-the-wisp — yesterday in London, the life of the party at our luncheon table, this evening — here,' he ended rather lamely.

'Possibly she has friends staying at this hotel — why not go and find out?'

Lady Susan in the soft light of the Arcadian spot threw an approving look in the general direction of the speaker. 'You always have such good ideas, Esteban,' she cried. 'Yes, let's go up there and surprise Manja.'

'Being a man of action as well as thought, I should second the motion,' declared the new Duque de Ventura. 'Though why I should suggest exerting myself to the extent of leaving my comfortable chair to help you all pay a surprise call on Madame Gebirge on such a lovely night passes my comprehension. Why not stay here and let her go on singing? I never did understand what *la Madre* saw in that stout person. At one time she was forever about our villa at Nice. Personally, dear people, I can't abide the lady.'

Lady Mary laughed at his plaintive tone; and José said: 'Confession is good for the soul. But I had no idea she was *persona non grata*, Esteban, to you.'

And Lady Mary remarked soothingly: 'Then you can stay out here — we don't want to drag any unwilling victim in with us. Though I don't know whether it's really wise to disturb Manja. She's the soul of good-nature, but how do we know whether a sudden visit might not be very inconvenient?'

To this Esteban drawled: 'I always understood theatrical folk were quite accustomed to seeing people at any hour of the day or night. Rather like the old kings of France ——'

Peremptorily Lady Susan cut across his speech: 'Listen!' she cried, 'that's not Manja. Some one else has begun to sing this time.'

A fascinating, far more golden voice had, indeed, begun to sing the great love aria from 'Samson and Delilah': '*Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix* ——' As a nightingale might have uttered its love call, the cajoling, passion-burdened notes poured out, and with just as effortless an art.

'No, this time it's not Manja,' murmured Lady Mary decidedly.

In absolute silence they all listened till the last thrilling sound had died upon the summer air and all was quiet once again.

Then José said impressively: 'That, my very dear Esteban, was the famous singer, De Segovia, or I'm a Dutchman.'

'And that you most certainly are not. And a very lovely singer she is, too,' answered Esteban. After a moment he added: 'I suppose I couldn't have heard her somewhere — she sounded vaguely familiar to me.'

More than one voice answered him such a thing was quite impossible. 'Why, the girl's been tucked away somewhere for ages. Nicolini has only just flashed her upon an admiring world,' finished Lady Mary.

They were still making speeches on the subject of De Segovia's history — as they imagined they knew it — when a window in the upper reaches of the George Inn was thrown more widely open and a man's voice called back into the lighted room behind him in the Gallic tongue: 'Manja, what do you say to going on the river this heavenly night?'

This was enough for Lady Mary. At once she screamed at the top of her voice: 'Manja, Manja Gebirge, what on earth are you doing here? We've been eavesdropping — and hearing the most glorious

singing. Can't we all come up and pay you a little visit?'

The window was then for the second time darkened by a much larger and more substantial shadow. '*Herr Gott!*' screamed Madame Gebirge in her turn into the night; 'who's calling me at the immorally late hour of nine o'clock? And in this innocent rural district? Surely you ought all to be neatly tucked up in your little beds and fast asleep like all the other natives of the place.'

Entertained by her own humor, she laughed heartily. 'Who are you all, anyway?' she demanded.

'Certainly not natives of this countryside,' called out José de Premijoy.

Manja leaned out yet farther: 'I know who you are!' she shouted back. 'Yes, yes, come on up here, all of you! We can give you at least some excellent sandwiches and some fair to middling wine.' She was about to leave the window when a thought occurred to her:

'Is Doña Juanita with you?' she asked.

'No,' said Lady Mary, now advancing up the lawn, in a surprised voice. 'Why, Manja?'

'A pity,' called back the prima donna regretfully; 'I particularly wanted to tell her something. Oh, well, it will have to wait till to-morrow. You know I go back to town on the early train — probably with the milk.'

On receiving this bucolic piece of news, Lady Mary rejoined promptly that if it were so, though it seemed to be the most uncomfortable hour of the twenty-four to choose for a journey, they would certainly impose their company on Manja for a little while; life being at best short, art fleeting, and no one knowing in this restless

world when they might have another opportunity for conversation.

The situation thus, almost somberly, painted, Manja, still shouting at the top of her voice so that the surrounding countryside fairly resounded with booming notes, bade them all come up at once before she could be cut off in her prime — like ox beef — or have time to remove herself, by any means, from the present very charming, if not too exciting, location.

Thus exhorted, immediately every one but the indifferent Duque de Ventura vanished gayly within doors and silence settled down once more on the landscape, though not for any very lengthy period. Left to himself, Esteban removed himself from the empty launch and, lighting a cigarette, began to walk slowly and meditatively up and down the Inn lawn.

After a short time he heard the rest of Lady Mary's house-party laughing and talking in the upper room from which Madame Gebirge had recently rendered the evening hideous with cheap, stentorianly shouted witticisms. There followed then a lively popping of corks and an even greater babel of tongues. Apparently every one was talking at once, while not a soul listened.

Down below, entirely forgotten by them all, Esteban stopped dead in the middle of the grass to laugh heartily. Then some one began to play a mandolin and the voices died away. And quite suddenly he found himself transported back to just such another scented, hot summer night as this in San Remo four years before. Because this Madame de Segovia, about whom all his friends were so extraordinarily crazy, had now begun to sing exactly the same love-song of Andalusia which Nina

Hanana — whom he now knew too well he could never entirely forget — had sung out in the garden of their villa during that last evening of grievous strife on which they had finally parted forever. Esteban, listening miserably, had to admit that the great opera star might be singing it more beautifully, but not more alluringly, than Nina. With a heavy sigh he threw away his half-smoked cigarette and, walking into the deep shadow cast by the low, rambling pile of buildings, sat himself down on a wooden bench almost beneath the window from which the melody continued to flow. Certainly the woman, whoever she was — and *la Madre* had already hinted to him she was none too virginal a character — could sing — and evoke for him a hundred bitter-sweet memories.

Morbidly he began to wish he had not made one of the river party if his evening must be spent thus. Why had he come to England at all — on a wild-goose chase, as it had turned out. Following that he began to wonder, as he had so often done in the last few months, why he had been such a young fool as to expect so much of Nina — a mere waif of the circus: a child that had not the slightest idea who were her parents. And why some irritable, carping devil within him had invariably forced him to criticize and quarrel with her when all she wanted of him was a cheerful affection. He knew she had possessed no ambition — had he been more patient they need never have come to so disastrous a parting of the ways. Sighing again, he was forced to admit that he had been simply insufferable. How had she ever stood him? She had borne with his caprice and his temper like an angel for months. Esteban, remembering many

occasions on which he had let himself go, was thoroughly ashamed of himself. And yet, knowing his own nature, he was also very well aware that, if it had been his lot to live through the whole, heart-breaking experience a second time, he would most probably have behaved to her in exactly the same way, some cold, proud demon within him driving his sarcastic tongue as harshly and surely.

Even as he sat in the empty, moon-flooded garden, listening to the voice of a perfect stranger singing Nina's song, Esteban could not help calling up a vision of her — as he had last seen her — bare of limb, clad scantily in ostrich feathers and tights, dancing a far too acrobatic dance with Manuel and Miguel Lopez, and all his old resentments flamed up afresh. How many nights had he watched her, flame-colored and supple, and how bitterly, dancing with that slow, indifferent smile on her face in Malida's act, at a very indifferent music-hall in a not too reputable quarter of Paris! And only last year, too. Had his mother ever known, she would have waxed even more satirical than usual on the subject of the theater and its artists. Only too quickly she would have pointed out that the eternal gypsy had gone back to her own world. That was the life for which she was suited. Such conduct was only to be anticipated. As well expect to tame a wildcat. Esteban had been mad to imagine he could educate and raise this girl to a class so different from her own. No, Nina Hanana was first and last a gypsy and would remain one. Taking her own way, and her own pleasure, where she wished; deserting him — as she had done — when it pleased her; fascinating in their turn other men as completely, and break-

ing every law human or divine that did not suit her. How often in the last few months had Doña Juanita lectured him on these lines!

Secretly amused, Esteban had often speculated on just how terrified of Nina and her powers his mother must be. At the same time, as constant dripping will wear away stone, she had managed to destroy his confidence in himself and had instilled drop by drop a fresh poison of jealousy in his soul that constantly destroyed his peace of mind. Nina in the arms of another man — that was too much. A fierce and possessive passion always invaded him then. In spite of his mother's caustically eloquent prophecies and warnings, no longer did Esteban attempt to disguise from himself what Nina, dear and detested, still meant to him. Bluntly put — did she beckon, he must go. That he knew to be inevitable. His only hope lay in quarreling violently with her should he ever meet her. He prayed Heaven, as did his mother, he reflected with an unmirthful smile, that their ways might never cross. It would be better so for all of them. For even while he followed her, she would probably exasperate him afresh and most grievously, and she would end by hating him more than ever. Perhaps his mother had been right when she told him it was an evil day for him when he first met Nina Hanana.

Only for hurrying Ramon away from him so heartlessly he could never quite forgive her. So his thoughts ran round and round, rankling and sore. Still, in justice to her he must confess he had never let her guess how dear the baby had become to him. That time last summer when he had seen her walking with the child in the Bois, he had nearly spoken to her. Ramon at three was

the sturdiest and most lovable of little fellows. If he had not sworn to Doña Juanita that he would put everything connected with Nina behind him and live the kind of life his clan expected of him, now that he was its head, he might —— But to be weak was impossible. Besides, he had given his word. And perhaps now he must even bring himself to take a duchess ——

The song came to an end. Suddenly and quite capriciously Esteban decided he would like to make the acquaintance of Madame de Segovia — mainly because her voice reminded him of Nina's. Therefore he lounged away from the bench on which he had been sitting, and walked into the Inn.

A yawning and very disapproving lad, verging on the twenties, at the desk directed him to mount the stairs which wound round the oak-paneled old hall, and on the floor above to turn sharply down a passage to the right.

'But you couldn't miss their rooms, anyway,' he added. 'They're making enough noise up there with their caterwauling to wake up old, deaf Jo Benchley in the village. They're at it all the day and half the night.'

'Art,' Esteban reminded him, 'is long and life is short.'

The youth stared at him sourly. 'The Bible says there's a time for all things,' he returned. 'I only sing in church.'

'Perhaps that's just as well,' said Esteban.

'There every one sings — or ought to.' Again reverting to these singing fools of whom he so heartily disapproved, he went on: 'It's lucky they're about the only people here at present. A few more like them and we should have all the neighbors up in arms. It's a very

select part round here. Why, they even stop the church clock at night. We don't hold with noise. As it is now, we can't hear ourselves think.'

Esteban regarded the prejudiced creature mournfully. 'I think your famous poet, Tennyson, is answered,' he said thoughtfully. 'There is no necessity, evidently, as far as the human brain is concerned, to appreciate the highest — at any rate, when we hear it merely. But are you quite certain you personally possess the required mechanism with which to think? So few do, you know. Most people prefer to get their thinking done for them by the public press and what-not.'

Inimically the tow-headed youth returned his meditative look. Then with an air of extreme malevolence he shot at Esteban: 'We don't like furriners in these parts — especially singing ones. Let them yowl in their own country. Why do they come here taking our money and upsetting of us?'

'Ah, why, indeed?' asked Esteban, and, turning away from the orator, started on his travels upstairs.

Carrying out meticulously the instructions of the Philistine below-stairs, he arrived without adventure at the door of the indicated room. His knock being unheard, after a moment he turned the door handle and walked in.

At first, beyond Manja, standing by the piano, once more about to sing for them German *lieder*, and a pleasant-looking fellow, already playing softly at the piano, Esteban did not perceive any one else except his own friends there. He was still standing just inside the door, wondering why Manja had looked so dismayed at the sight of him, when some one came into the sitting-room

from some room beyond, and Manja's voice ran out in the *Nussbaum*.

Esteban turned his head to look curiously at the younger prima donna. So this was De Segovia, whom musical London was affirming loudly to be the greatest Carmen since Emma Calvé had sung the rôle! A true Spanish type; dark-headed, lustrous-eyed, graceful. The next moment he had all but called out, 'Nina Hanana!'

Over the backs of that unenlightened, tranquil audience seated about the room they looked for a long moment at each other. Then, without a sign of recognition, Nina moved over to the long, low window, which practically filled one wall, and sat down on the cretonne-covered seat under it.

Lady Mary, becoming conscious of some tension in the air, turned and saw Esteban, and beckoned him to come and sit by her. Unhurriedly he crossed to her and let himself down into the large wicker chair next her.

'So you changed your mind?' whispered Lady Mary.

Esteban nodded, and for the next half-hour presented to the world the picture of an inscrutable, composed young man.

Manja's recital concluded, he rose at once to greet and congratulate Manja. 'My mother will much regret she did not come with us to-night,' he said.

Manja gave him an odd look. 'I can well believe that,' she said under her breath as he turned away, and Lady Mary hurried to present him to a gracious but indifferent stranger: one who regarded him with veiled, impassive eyes. However, he made his bow and his compliments with just that right amount of demonstrated

cordiality and warmth to be expected of a young man, perfectly worldly, meeting for the first time a singer already so celebrated and so indisputably mistress of her art. And received, in return, a slim hand to kiss, the faintest of smiles, and a slow, half-mischievous, half-alarmed look from Madame de Segovia.

'*El Duque*,' she said sweetly, 'is too flattering, I am afraid. I only hope when he has the felicity, as he expresses it, of hearing me in Carmen, or perhaps as Delilah, he will not be greatly disappointed. Connoisseurs are hard to please.'

Esteban shook his head. 'That would be impossible, Madame,' he replied suavely, 'seeing that it was your voice just now, in that Andalusian love-song we Spaniards know so well, which sent me adventuring here to make the acquaintance of the singer.' And he endowed Nina with a look of great significance.

Nina laughed and said to Pierre, who came up just then with a plate of sandwiches and a glass of claret-cup for her, 'Did you hear that?'

'Another tribute to you, Nina,' he returned.

'Every one is far too kind, dear Pierre,' she drawled, and at once presented the two men to each other, explaining at some length that Monsieur Chanel was a musical genius, indeed, and without his constant advice and help her career would not amount to anything.

Esteban drew his brows together. 'Monsieur Chanel is much to be envied,' he said formally.

Perfectly unconscious of any hint of storm in his summer sky, Pierre cheerfully opposed to this that Nina was a goose who rated his services far too highly. He ended by offering Esteban a sandwich — which he accepted —

before he took himself back to the table, round which all the rest had crowded, to pour himself out a drink.

'Nina,' said Esteban under his breath, in Spanish, 'I recognized you at once, though you've changed a lot.'

Once again Madame de Segovia's smile intrigued him. 'And you haven't changed a bit,' she said.

'I really congratulate you on your wonderful voice,' said Esteban.

To Manja Gebirge, watching the odd encounter from the other side of the room, there came a moment of pure panic, knowing as she did from Nicolini what Doña Juanita's plans were. That Nina should dare to flirt with her son so openly — making great eyes at him already — might be feminine, but was terribly indiscreet. Over Lady Mary's plain features there was appearing an expression of triumphant delight at the effect Nina was having on her new admirer.

'Madame de Segovia has actually made a complete capture of our dear but self-sufficient Esteban, I declare she has,' she whispered to Manja in high glee.

'Madame de Segovia is very attractive,' returned Manja honestly. Though she was thinking, '*Herr Gott!* we shall all be involved before long, and probably enjoy a murder trial before all is finished.' And she sighed so deeply at the unpleasant prospect that Pierre demanded to know if she had lost a fortune suddenly; and Nina, as though warned by her restless and disturbed manner, rose from the seat under the window and came up to the supper table followed by Esteban.

'The Duke does not seem to approve of my going to South America,' she announced wickedly. 'He will not believe that I am going so soon, either. Please, some one

tell him that my contracts are signed, and like the laws of the Medes and Persians, isn't that right, Pierre — I heard you talking about them the other day — they may not be broken.'

Thus appealed to, Pierre, pulling out an empty chair so that she could sit by him as she seemed to wish, remarked: 'The Duke thinks perhaps you should only sing in Europe at present. And I'm not sure he isn't right. But Salvatore is an old tyrant; and, after all, he's been behind you from the start. And I suppose we must admit he doesn't make many mistakes. He's too wily a bird.'

'That's entirely what I meant, Monsieur Chanel,' said Esteban politely.

'You will flatter me, won't you?' said Nina carelessly. And because she could think of nothing safe to start as a conversational subject then, with Esteban present, turned to Lady Mary to say regretfully: 'So few more days in this lovely England of yours. Manja told me you had nothing but fogs, but I haven't even seen one yet.'

'We don't get them till November,' said Lady Susan. 'We do have jolly weather sometimes.'

'And I shall take away so many happy memories,' added Nina.

'I suppose,' said Esteban, eying her reflectively from his seat beyond Lady Susan, 'one would always have a soft spot in one's heart for the country that conferred immortality on one.'

'Now that's very pretty, Esteban,' called out José de Premijoy. 'Madame de Segovia should be very much obliged to you for so magnificent a tribute.'

'And Madame de Segovia is,' retorted Nina promptly, with another of those sidelong looks at the Duque de Ventura, which invariably left Manja with a particularly cold feeling at the pit of her stomach. 'The girl needn't play Carmen off the stage as well as on.' 'Seeing,' continued Nina, 'it is the very first compliment of the kind she has received from his grace.'

As the evening wore on, Manja grew more and more disturbed. Alone she caught the undercurrent of provocation and thrust which pervaded the lightest word uttered by Esteban or Nina. No one else there had the slightest idea that they were indulging in a fierce fencing match through all the laughter and babble of the moment.

Finally the whole thing became too much for her, and she decided to get rid of her visitors without ceremony. Therefore she said plaintively, about eleven o'clock, gazing pointedly at the hands of the gilt monstrosity poised so precariously on the mantel shelf: 'If I am to catch my train to-morrow morning, I must go to bed now. I am a wreck if I do not get at least six good hours. I hate to hurry all you dear, delightful people away, but — you all know brusque old Manja and will forgive her.'

'Yes, yes,' they all said.

'A singer's life is a dog's life,' she went on. 'Continually one has to give up doing what one likes best for rest — or vocalizing — or something equally disagreeable and necessary.'

Thus determinedly did she break up the gathering and shoo them all out into the night, hoping to Heaven that Esteban Valdez had had no chance to communicate any private desire he might have to Nina Hanana during his

stay in the George Inn. But in this pious hope she was to be disappointed, for she had, with all her watching, failed to perceive the moment of bustle and movement after supper, wherein Esteban had managed to slip a piece of paper with but eleven words on it inside the leather blotter which lay on Nina's writing-table. Only Nina, as he meant her to be, was aware that in between the sheets of pink blotting-paper now lay a message for her. And equally under the very nose of the unconscious though anxious Madame Gebirge did she manage to retrieve and secrete it within her lace handkerchief before the last visitor had drifted down the stairs, in a chorus of good wishes and farewells, to the garden and the waiting launch.

Esteban, too, as far as Manja could see, had contented himself with a very formal leave-taking. So, hugging hope once again to herself, Manja breathed more easily. For perhaps it meant that he would make no effort to patch up things with Nina. And having learned a good deal of worldly wisdom in the course of a long life, she was careful to invite no confidences from her after they were alone again; taking care to retire to her own sleeping-apartment before Pierre smoked his final cigarette and went to his. If the girl wished to speak to her about Esteban's dramatic coming, she could easily seek her out, reflected Manja. But she had long fallen asleep and was snoring comfortably and rhythmically in her enormous brass bedstead when Nina, reading for the fiftieth time Esteban's short note as she sat on the side of her bed, looked at her watch and decided to risk a further meeting with him.

'I must see you. I shall return in two hours — Esteban,' said the note.

'It is no good putting off the day of decision,' thought Nina, as she wrapped herself in a shawl and opened her door softly.

The grandfather clock in the hall below struck two as she shut it behind her.

CHAPTER VI

I

In the mean time Esteban Valdez had returned calmly enough with every one else to Wayneflete, that comfortable, mellow, red-brick and rambling, riverside house belonging to Lady Mary Fleetwood, some ten miles away, set in extensive gardens full of sweet-smelling old-fashioned flowers. On arriving there, however, to every one's loudly expressed astonishment, he steadily refused to 'whoop it up,' as José expressed it, any more that night.

'And you a Spaniard to whom the night is as the day,' protested his disgusted friend.

The reminder was of no avail. Quite firmly he refused to join in a suggested game of bridge, or a hundred up at billiards.

'If I am to play a decent game of polo to-morrow, I must, like Manja Gebirge,' he announced, without the flicker of an eyelid, 'enjoy my six good hours of rest. You know good old brusque Esteban — and will forgive him. The life of a polo player is a dog's life ——'

Clamorous voices vociferating here that the excuse was far, far too thin failed to shake his resolution.

'I wonder at you,' he said, facing them imperturbably. 'Do you not wish our team to win to-morrow? I'm leaving you all — I'm going to bed — it's past twelve ——'

Followed by a storm of chaff, for, as several of them pointed out, Esteban could sit up all night at cards, or

dance till dawn, and go forth the next day on whatever business he had in hand without a sign of weariness, he ran up the wide staircase which curved round two sides of the hall and disappeared from view. At the head of the stairs, however, he turned, and, leaning over the balustrade, called out warningly: 'Don't any of you dare to come and disturb me before seven o'clock to-morrow morning. Or I promise you I shall play a rotten game. Anyway, I shan't answer you.'

And though he spoke carelessly enough, there was an edge in his tone which made José raise his eyebrows and remark *sotto voce* to his future Countess: 'Something must have upset our dear Esteban. I know him too well to be deceived by such talk. Now I do wonder what wasp could have stung him this evening? He was all right when we started on our excursion. Quite gay, for him. There certainly never was such a moody fellow.'

Lady Mary, presuming on the immunity from retort her age afforded her, and less tactful or more observant, did not hesitate to shout loudly after the departing recluse: 'You might just as well admit you have a well-developed case of De Segovia-itis, and you're only forsaking us so that you may dream about her in the seclusion of your own room. Well, she's fascinating enough. Your mother is the only creature I've met, so far, who doesn't admire her. Pleasant dreams, anyway.'

She only laughed heartily when her niece reminded her reprovingly that to put such heedless ideas into Esteban's head would hardly be the way to please Doña Juanita. 'When you know he's supposed to be more or less engaged now to Estella Diaz,' she remarked severely.

The said Estella being a plain but cheerful heiress with whom, in a not very remote past, Lady Susan had gone to school in one of the most expensive and fashionable establishments near Paris.

'Not that you ever learned very much there,' her aunt had pointed out, 'but I suppose you did acquire a kind of polish and a bowing acquaintance with two or three languages.'

Now, to her niece's rebuke, she retorted spiritedly: 'Stuff and fudge! You know as well as I do, Susie, he doesn't care two straws about the girl. She may be amiable, but she's fat, and as sure as I'm a living woman she'll own a mustache one day.'

'She'll also own half a million,' murmured José to his cigarette.

In her turn marching toward the staircase, Lady Mary lost the cynicism. 'Nita,' she finished carelessly over her shoulder, 'won't be an easy problem for any daughter-in-law—mustached or otherwise. But Estella would have weight on her side, at any rate.'

Chuckling contentedly at her own witticism, she bade them all good-night, advised the four or five other young patricians who made up her house-party to get their beauty sleep while they still had some good looks worth possessing, and vanished upstairs.

Left to itself, the younger set continued to gossip and smoke and drink whiskies-and-sodas till the clock struck one, when it also dispersed in an atmosphere of light badinage, bedwards. Only José and Lady Susan, as is the way of all lovers, lingered on their sofa for a little while longer, loath to end another perfect moment too soon.

Finally, José, smoking a very last cigarette, said, suddenly reverting to Esteban's strange desire for solitude, 'Susette, I hope we are not going to have another scandal ——'

'What kind, darling?' asked Lady Susan sleepily, leaning against his shoulder.

'Why, with Esteban. Why this fierce determination for the life of an anchorite? He was odd, too. Almost as if he'd received a shock of some kind. Can he have fallen in love again? *Dios!* I hope not. But did you notice, my cherished cabbage, how taciturn the lad was in the launch coming home?'

Lady Susan yawned. 'I love Esteban very much,' she returned lightly. 'We all do, José, dear. But I do wish he'd settle down. Then perhaps Doña Juanita would stop prowling about after him all the time like a middle-aged leopard, and spoiling most of our jolliest parties. I'd a deal rather have Estella about. She has a little common-sense, at least.'

'And will need it with Esteban,' opined José wisely, 'if she gets him.'

Lady Susan laughed. 'I wouldn't mind betting Doña Juanita buttonholed Aunt Mary the minute she got to her room as to what we did this evening, and whom we saw, just because Esteban was with us,' she said.

'*Adorada*,' said José, pulling her to her feet, 'it is cruelty to dumb animals to keep you here any longer. But I will confide to you something you probably know as well as I do before I kiss you once more on the tip of that funny little nose of yours, and bid you a tender good-night ——'

He paused to take breath.

'Rich flowers of speech,' said Lady Susan.

'No interruptions permitted,' returned José. 'But Doña Juanita is a very jealous woman, and Esteban represents to her everything she most desires. Position, and possibilities, and all that kind of thing. But for her most fortunate toothache she would have been with us this evening; and what she might have seen would not have pleased her at all. Though it need not have worried her; for my poor Esteban, to whom I have been devoted since my twelfth birthday, had a bad jolt a few years ago and I doubt if he's got over it yet.'

Meanwhile Esteban, having avoided saying goodnight to his mother, though he knew she would probably be expecting him to tap on her door before he went to bed, was pacing impatiently up and down his room, wondering when he might dare venture out into the night again. Up and down the carpet he prowled, looking at his watch every five minutes, a prey to the most violent emotions. Meeting Nina so unexpectedly had bowled him over completely. When he had informed her she had changed, he was not alluding alone to her newly aloof pose. As on that last Sunday evening of their life together, he was also conscious of a steady, veiled hostility which rose like some glacial barrier between them. That it had to do with Pierre Chanel, he did not believe; though, with all a Latin's quickness where another man is concerned, Esteban suspected the young musician with the fine brown eyes of being in love with her. A dozen little intimate touches, gradations of tone, to which she had responded as though they were of daily occurrence, had not gone unremarked by him.

'But I could get her from him, any day,' he reflected. 'After all, the fellow is only a kind of tutor to her. He knows Manja Gebirge just as well ——'

In those musical circles wherein Madame Gebirge had queened so long, Esteban was well aware there was often an easy display of *camaraderie* which meant nothing. 'Darling,' and 'dear,' and 'my adored angel,' were all in the day's work. And embracing and kissing would supervene on the least provocation — a successful concert — a new contract — a well-sung song. It was all very much on the surface. There was certainly no standoffishness amongst Manja's friends and acquaintances. Yet before he had left the George Inn, Esteban, goaded by her indifference, had been half inclined to perceive a deeper feeling between Nina and the Frenchman than met the eye.

'And why not? It would be all very suitable, I suppose.'

It was therefore with a mounting sense of irritable restlessness that he endured the hour before all seemed quiet throughout the house. Then noiselessly, his shoes in his hand, he glided down a back staircase to that garden door near the billiard-room which, generally merely bolted on the inside, was the easiest to open without danger of disturbing some lightly sleeping inhabitant of Wayneflete.

As he shut the door behind him, he fancied he heard voices still, somewhere in the direction of the main hall. But as no one appeared to have discovered him, he stepped into the garden and disappeared down a hedge-bordered path which led to the boathouse.

At last in the birchbark canoe he had decided to use

to cover the watery miles which lay between him and the George Inn, Esteban shot out on the placidly moving river, congratulating himself on having at least started on his mission without having been perceived by any curious eye — friendly or inimical. Without incident he made his voyage — though at one lock he had hard work rousing the snoring keeper — and at length found himself at the silent landing-stage on which a gaudy signpost called the river traveler's attention to the George Inn, good beds, and good fishing.

Here everything was as dead as bucolic slumbers could make it. No light burned in any window of the rambling structure. Behind their swaying curtains no doubt the guests of the George snored, and dreamed peacefully.

Esteban stifling a laugh, when he thought of his mother's horror should she ever guess on what sort of an errand he had come, fastened the canoe and, jumping ashore, walked rapidly over the lawn to a little summer house he had noticed earlier standing solitarily under a group of elm trees where the garden ended, whose entrance overlooked the opposite bank of the river. It had seemed to him far enough away from the house to ensure privacy, at that hour, at all events, and here he sat himself down to await the coming of Nina. Curiously enough, though she did not appear for at least twenty minutes, he never doubted but that she would arrive.

He had been sitting in a deep, cheerless meditation for some time when he glanced up suddenly to see her standing motionless on the path outside his rustic retreat, looking vaguely along the shimmering water.

'Nina,' he called in a low, cautious voice. 'Nina — I am here.'

She turned her head to listen and he called again, 'Ninetta.'

Then, coming to the entrance of the weather-beaten little house, she remained there looking into its darkness. Out in the moonlight as she was, Esteban could see she was still wearing the painted muslin frock over orange silk which he could not help admitting became her so well. Now she had a black Spanish shawl over her shoulders, embroidered in three shades of blue. Because he was smoking, she could catch a glimmer of pale features in the opalescent darkness and was aware of his eyes staring at her moodily.

'Nina,' he said, after a moment, 'I believe you have the most lovely voice in the world.'

She dropped him a little curtsy. 'And so you are a duke,' she said.

She heard him chuckle in the shadows where he sat. 'Whatever made you say that?' he asked.

Nina shrugged her shoulders. 'I always say exactly what comes into my mind — now.'

'I shall certainly come and hear you sing Carmen,' he promised her. 'I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'I hope you'll enjoy the evening,' she replied coolly.

Esteban, seeing that she made no effort to enter his retreat, began to chant a nursery rhyme he had once at a very tender age learned from his English nurse:

'"Will you walk into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly.'

'What are you singing?' asked Nina. 'If you were properly trained you might have quite a good voice — probably a baritone.'

Esteban took no notice of the uncivil speech. 'I wonder,' he remarked musingly, 'if I'm the spider.'

'What are you talking about?' she demanded.

'An old rhyme I learned as a child. I don't know that it has much to do with our case, though. Do come in, Nina; you make me quite fidgety seeing you stand there in that ghostly fashion in the doorway. Very soon probably I shall be able to see through you.'

Thus plaintively adjured, Nina came in and sat down on the opposite side of the small wooden table on which he was leaning his arms.

'Afraid I shall make love to you, *encantadora*?' he asked mischievously when he saw she intended to keep the width of the table between them.

'No,' she retorted. 'It's probably the last thing you are thinking of.'

Again Esteban laughed. 'I can't think why I wanted to see you,' he continued, in a jeering tone.

'Curiosity, probably. I can easily go away,' she said smoothly.

'So you can,' he admitted, and for a second or two there was silence.

Then Nina remarked abruptly: 'I don't know that we're getting very far.'

Esteban shrugged his shoulders. 'I was trying to make up my mind how I should put it ——'

'Then don't let me disturb you, Señor.'

And again nothing was heard but the lap of the water against the towing-path, and somewhere in the woods on the other side of the river a night owl hooted mournfully.

'I hardly know where to begin,' said Esteban at last.

'Can't you remember why you wrote me the note?'

'Perfectly — but that will come later. Do you like being an opera singer?' he asked her suddenly.

Nina considered. 'It's a very hard life in some ways. One ought to be as strong as a horse. Also one has to study so much difficult music, so continually. I don't suppose I shall ever learn more than three or four rôles. Dancing with Miguel and Manuel was much easier. More simple — once one knew the dance.'

In the fragrant dimness she heard Esteban move impatiently. 'I saw you dance last summer,' he said in a defiant tone.

Nina was frankly astonished. 'In those absurd out-of-the-way music-halls?' she asked. 'Whatever made you go there?'

'You,' he returned bluntly.

'Oh,' she said after a moment.

'And I wish you hadn't worn those fearful ostrich feather effects. I thought I'd taught you a bit of elegance in dressing ——'

'The audience liked them,' said Nina indifferently. 'And anyway, now I'm an opera singer — I've moved up a step. I'm out of the circus. And often I'm really quite sorry. I miss the sawdust a whole lot.'

Esteban took no notice of the speech. 'Well, I didn't really come to talk about ostrich feathers at two o'clock in the morning.'

'Nearer three,' said Nina; 'it's getting quite light. How did you manage to get back here?'

'In a canoe,' he replied. 'It's lying at the landing-stage over there.'

'I've never been in a canoe,' said Nina. 'Pierre won't

take me in one because I don't know how to swim. He considers a boat much safer. It's also, as I tell him, much less exciting.'

Esteban laughed. 'I shouldn't be afraid to take you,' he declared with a distinctly contemptuous note in his voice. 'Are you in love with that fellow? A blind man could perceive he was crazy about you.'

In her turn Nina laughed, too. 'And why not?' she demanded airily. 'He won't be the first or the last man to fall in love with me.' Her provocative and challenging tone annoyed Esteban, as perhaps she intended it to.

'Would it be indiscreet to inquire if his intentions turn toward marriage?'

Nina laughed. 'How should I know? I've never asked him.'

Esteban emitted a profound sigh. Then he said slowly, 'But this verbal fencing will get us nowhere, Nina. Do you care for me at all — still?'

There was a prolonged silence. Finally she returned in so low a tone that Esteban barely heard the words: 'I really don't know. So much has happened ——'

'Which means, I suppose, that you have not forgiven me, *angel de mi vida*. And I don't know that I blame you. Love lost is very hard to recapture.'

This was not at all what he had intended to say, but, as so often happens on these emotional occasions, strange phrases seemed to be pouring from his inner consciousness, over which he had not the slightest control.

'I was a young prig and perfectly insufferable four years ago.' In the growing opaline effulgence he could just see Nina move restlessly.

'It was all wrong — we never should have met, I expect.'

'But we did meet,' he returned earnestly. 'One cannot help these things.'

'Perhaps not.' But her air was openly doubtful.

Esteban leant over the table. 'I adore you — to live without you kills me,' he said, quite conversationally.

'Oh,' said Nina on a deep sigh.

'Will you never come back to me?' he asked.

'Oh, no, no ——'

'Why not?'

'You know it's perfectly impossible.'

'But I shouldn't make a bad sort of husband. At least you know my worst points.'

'I didn't suit you before,' Nina whispered, but she did not look at him.

Esteban caught her hands which were folded one over the other, on the rough surface of the little table. 'Nina, Nina,' he cried urgently, 'forgive me! I love you terribly! I haven't had a day's peace since you ran away. Let us forget all that ——' Swiftly he moved to where she sat and took her, unresisting, in his arms. 'I adore you,' he said as he kissed her. 'Tell me you love me.'

'You know I do,' she said.

After a little time she pushed him from her. 'Esteban,' she said, 'what are we doing?'

'What we should have done a long while ago, sweetheart. Come, don't let's bother about the world now.' He pulled her up, and, tucking her arm in his, said peremptorily, 'You're going out in that canoe with me. I could laugh and sing and shout all at once,' he ended joyously.

'Whereas we must be very quiet,' she laughed softly. 'But really, Esteban, darling, you have rushed me so ——'

'The only way in love and war.'

'—— That I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels. Really, you know, we should think things out.'

He pooh-poohed her. 'You're mine and I'm not going to let you go again.'

Seated in the canoe before him, she looked so radiant he told her eagerly he could hardly wait for the moment when he should claim her before the world.

'And you will sing to me only, then,' he said.

'At least I shall not shame you now,' she said. 'I've learned a lot in these last months. I can be perfectly — *mondaine*.'

This time her naïveté enchanted him. 'Only don't change — stay as you are,' he begged her. 'And you love nobody but me?'

'No one, Esteban dear.'

2

From the window of Esteban's empty room Doña Juanita impatiently awaited the coming of another day. But not for her unappreciative eyes were displayed the thousand amazing beauties of a summer dawn. Pearly lights, skies mysteriously painted, glamorous, shining, and splendid, trees catching the first golden sunbeams, water rippling translucently, choirs of birds hymning their matutinal cantatas — all, all was lost on her.

Sunk in the depths of an armchair so placed that she must see him cross the lawn, she asked herself con-

tinually: 'When will Esteban be back? Will he never come? Has she won him back from me again?'

The questions repeated themselves endlessly with exceeding bitterness in her aching head.

'What a piece of ill-luck that Mary should have so by chance come upon Manja Gebirge and that girl! What could have made them leave London at just this moment?'

And yet as she asked herself the question, she was astute enough to realize it was probably the result of her visit to Nicolini. Something must have been said to Nina. And now the whole thing was worse than ever.

'One hardly knows what to do in such cases as these,' she muttered. 'But one thing I mean to do — keep them separated.' Nor did she care how she attained her object.

'No — by all the Saints! Nina Hanana has done me enough injury. Never shall she be accepted as my son's duchess — if he were ever foolish enough to make her that. When a man is in love, sense flies far away. But I swear no child of hers shall be his heir.'

From the instant, ill omened indeed, in which Lady Mary, in the course of her good-night visit to Doña Juanita's bedroom, had imparted to that dismayed lady the dire news of her son's unexpected meeting with the too fascinating De Segovia — with whom, moreover, even Lady Mary seemed to find him unnecessarily captivated — Esteban's mother augured the worst. So — once again a trick of fate had tumbled her house of cards about her ears. But outwardly entirely indifferent, and mistress of herself, she listened to her old friend's idle

chatter, waited till the great mansion sank into repose, and then took her noiseless way to Esteban's room.

Her gentle knock upon the mahogany panels of his door being productive of no response, she ventured to try the handle very softly. Curiously enough, in making his escape from the sleeping house, Esteban had quite forgotten to lock his door behind him, and now Doña Juanita, after listening intently for some minutes, with head bent to the keyhole, was able to penetrate into a room filled only with moonlight and silence. Standing in the center of it, she noted with a tightening of thin lips that the bed had not been slept in and asked herself bitterly would she, after her months of hard work, yet have to acknowledge defeat? But even as she asked the question she knew the answer to it. This time there should be no mistake; she would take care to separate them forever. Some day Esteban would thank her for it.

But now wearily she moved to the window, and sat down in an armchair by it, from which she could watch the long vista of lawn which sloped to the river. Her head resting against the cushions, her hands in her lap, her eyes closed, nobody would have given her credit for the wild turmoil of anger and alarmed planning which made her heart beat fast and her head ache. Outwardly she looked the picture of patience on a monument smiling at grief. But underneath this immobile exterior there was a fierce marshaling together of all her forces.

'This fight will be to a finish. Either she or I.'

As soon as she had the least idea of what had happened, she would strike — swiftly and hard.

Reviewing the situation through those weary hours of

waiting, she smiled once or twice — for after all, she had the advantage of them both. Esteban was not aware that she knew Nina Hanana and the famous De Segovia to be one and the same person. And he certainly had no idea she had ever set eyes on his son. Let him then continue to imagine his mother to be blind and ignorant. And but for that fortunate chance, as it had turned out, when she had run across the sleeping child behind the screen in the singer's dressing-room, Doña Juanita candidly admitted that, to a very large extent, she would have been playing her cards in the dark. But to-day, thanks be to the Saints — she knew what to do and how to do it. Busily her brain began to scheme and plan. The peal of wedding bells began to sound faintly in her ears —— Then she pulled herself up. It was no good counting chickens till they were hatched.

'Well,' she reflected somberly, 'one look at Esteban should be enough. If she has sent him away — if ——'

In any case, she had no intention of immediately forcing his hand. There would be no need for speech. His attitude toward the dawn — and life, she told herself cynically, would be sufficient.

It was past four and the birds had been singing noisily for hours, it seemed to her, and the light in the garden outside was far too bright for one who must be planning an unobtrusive return into Lady Mary's house, when she saw him walking carelessly and quite openly over the long stretch of green lawn below her. A deep breath escaped Doña Juanita and she leaned forward to watch him. Hatless, and whistling the refrain of Nina's Andalusian love-song, and looking, even her jaundiced eye had to admit, handsomer than usual, and certainly

more boyish than she had seen him appear for many a long day, he strode over the grass, careless of who saw him.

'So — thus it is,' she whispered.

She waited, immovable and stern, till he had turned the corner of the house; then quietly, too quietly — first deliberately drawing down the blind and rearranging the silken curtain — crept out of the darkened room and, closing the door firmly behind her, slipped back to her own bedroom.

'We shall see,' she murmured, 'if he notices that the place has been entered in his absence. Either way will suit me.'

But Esteban, coming a few moments later, was too full of dreams of Nina to notice anything. And remembering that he must play polo, and a dashing, scientific game, too, if the Hurlingham team was to win, went at once to bed and slept like a child for the next four hours. He had quite forgotten that when he left the room — æons before — he had drawn back the curtains of his window and pulled up the blind.

Meanwhile, Doña Juanita, after bathing her forehead with eau-de-cologne, also retired to bed and slept soundly till ten o'clock, when she roused herself sufficiently to eat an excellent breakfast brought her by a pretty housemaid. By this Hebe she sent a message to Esteban that she would like to see him before he started for Hurlingham with the rest of the house-party. She herself did not feel equal to going — her toothache of the day before having worn her out. Possibly because, deep in his heart, he was the least bit afraid of what his arrogant and prejudiced mother might do if, violent and reckless

she should get any inkling of his and Nina's plans, he came to her room almost at once.

At breakfast Lady Mary had announced to him in her heavily jesting manner that Doña Juanita knew all about his sudden infatuation for De Segovia. But he must not imagine he would have it all his own way. Esteban, listening to her pleasantries, would have been much more alarmed if he had then realized that his mother knew very well who De Segovia was. But even without this important clue, none too pleased at Lady Mary's blundering idea of a joke, he said:

'You never told her all that nonsense? Lady Mary, how could you? You know my mother is a serious character and never attempts to understand light badinage of that kind. You've probably put her in a dreadful mood. Now, I expect I am in for it.'

Though this distressing thought did not deter him from enjoying a very good breakfast.

Again humming Nina's song to give himself all the courage he felt he might need in the coming interview — why she was sending for him so specially, and at that hour, he could not imagine — Esteban knocked on the panels of his mother's bedroom door.

A crisp, clear voice bade him 'Come in.'

The sunshine pouring into the cheerful, gayly decorated room from two great windows did not reach the erect figure sitting amongst heaped-up pillows in the great carved bed. With a priceless lace cap on her fair hair and an equally costly trifle of a lace coat wrapped about her, frail-looking but as resistless as finely tempered steel, she sat eating her breakfast with every appearance of the most complete enjoyment. Esteban

strode up to the bed and dutifully kissed the smooth cheek she offered him.

'A lucky day to you, my son,' she said in Spanish. 'I hope your team will win this afternoon. I regret that I shall not be there to see you play, but I am not feeling well enough to exert myself to that extent. You are all lunching at Hurlingham, are you not?'

'Yes,' said Esteban, 'we leave in half an hour. And I suppose we shall be back in the wee, small hours, because we are all dining at the Club and going on to some dance after.'

Doña Juanita said indifferently: 'Then I shall not see you for some days. Because this afternoon I am also going to town to get my tooth removed — I fancy. And I shall not come back here.'

Esteban, wandering about the room, came to a halt in front of the window farthest away from his mother's neighborhood, and remained there, with his back to her, looking out.

'Where shall you go?' he asked after a moment.

Doña Juanita began to drink her coffee, and therefore did not at once reply. Finally she said: 'I shall go back to Spain, I think. Living in other people's houses, however beautiful, one tires of, you know. I have a fancy for Ronda.'

Though she did not see it, Esteban frowned — he had no wish for her to be at Ronda when he took Nina there within the next few weeks.

'Won't you be very dull there?' he asked.

'To be dull and bored is no new condition with me,' returned his mother. 'I'd as soon be bored in Ronda as in a foreign country.'

'Ah,' said Esteban.

Doña Juanita poured herself out another cup of coffee. 'Such a pity,' she said thoughtfully, 'this room does not overlook the river.'

'It might have been too damp for you if it had,' he returned, in rather a surprised tone.

'But so much more interesting,' said Doña Juanita. 'Don't you think river traffic is always amusing? People are so often out with the wrong partners. If I were staying here any longer, I should ask you to take me out in a canoe.'

'And I should have been delighted to do it, *madre mia*,' said Esteban, 'if you had felt equal to it.'

Doña Juanita, spreading a slice of toast with butter, decided it was time to advance another step.

'What is this Lady Mary tells me about last night and her new protégée, Madame de Segovia? You must have made yourself rather conspicuous, my son, surely?'

Esteban shrugged his shoulders. 'You know Lady Mary — once she gets a silly idea in her head,' he returned impatiently, 'she always works it to death. Madame de Segovia ——' he hesitated.

'You met, then, I suppose, for the first time,' she finished the sentence very smoothly for him.

Esteban did not reply. And Doña Juanita began to eat her toast.

Finally she remarked, a shade less suavely than before: 'I must talk to you a little seriously this morning.'

'Yes?'

'Here we are in July — and yet you seem to have no news to give me.'

'No news?' Still with his back obstinately turned to her, Esteban asked, 'What news do you want me to give you?'

'I want to see you with a wife,' said his mother. 'It is high time your duchess took her place in society. I have had a hint recently from very high quarters on this subject.'

Esteban turned at last, and, walking up to the bed, sat down on the end of it.

'Can't you wait a little longer?' he asked.

'No,' said Doña Juanita with great determination. 'Come, it is not as if you were some romantic boy any longer. You have had your experiences by this time; and I expect — and so does every one else — that you will make the kind of marriage a man in your position should. If you marry the right kind of girl, she will know equally how to lead you with a silken string.'

'And suppose I don't want to be led with a silken string?'

'You mean to remain a bachelor ——' she inquired.

Esteban laughed. '*Madre mia*,' he said, getting up, 'have a little patience; in perhaps four weeks I may have something to say to you on the subject. Meanwhile — I am going to play polo.'

He took her hand, kissed it lightly, and walked out of the room. The door shut firmly behind him.

Her farewells almost too urbanely uttered and leaving a distinctly puzzled Lady Mary behind her, vigorously waving adieux on the front steps of Wayneflete, Doña Juanita was driven, a couple of hours after Esteban and the rest of the younger set had departed, to the nearest

station on the Great Western Railway, there presumably to board the train for London.

Greatly to her hostess's surprise — for it was not like her to wish to be so solitary — Doña Juanita had been extremely insistent on the point that no one should accompany her actually to the train, alleging that for this occasion at least her toothache was making her feel far too morose for her to be a pleasant companion under these trying circumstances.

'In such cases, dear Mary, solitude is best, I know,' she had resolutely opposed to all Lady Mary's well-meant if rather teasing suggestions for the cure of the ailment. 'Probably there is nothing for it but to have it out. No, I shall certainly not allow you to put yourself out and cancel all your day's engagements just to come up to town with me. I shall be perfectly capable of doing all that is necessary — and quite satisfactorily, too. If one has to visit the dentist, that is the one spot where one does not wish to drag one's best friend. It's very sweet of you to suggest coming — but I wouldn't hear of it.'

Thus firmly discouraged and perceiving, for whatever reason, Nita was not to be shaken in her determination to sally forth alone, Lady Mary perforce had to let the obstinate woman have her own way. But after all the explanation, she would have been inexpressibly astonished could she have seen Doña Juanita descend briskly, bag and baggage, from the local train she had taken at the very next stop instead of going on with it to the junction, there to take the express to town. And to have heard her demand to be driven to the George Inn in the old-fashioned rustic fly which with praise-

worthy industry met all trains would have surprised her still more. But Doña Juanita, jogging along in the ancient vehicle, looked contented enough.

Arrived at the George, she at once booked a room and had her luggage taken up to it. Then turning, asked, apparently as an afterthought, if Madame Gebirge were in the hotel still.

The same tow-headed youth Esteban had encountered the night before behind the desk was on duty again.

He stared at Doña Juanita, then said ungraciously: 'Can't you read English?' — and pulling the day book toward him, ran his finger down the page. Doña Juanita remained unmoving till he should answer her question. 'No,' he said at last, 'she went off on the early train this morning.'

'Ah,' said Doña Juanita, 'I thank you. And perhaps you will be so good as to tell me who, of her friends, is still here?'

Again the tow-headed misanthrope made a pretense of consulting his rather battered tome. 'Just two of them foreigners,' he replied churlishly; 'the screecher and the one that bangs the piano all day. He ought to be in the fields doing a good day's work. Madame de Segovia and Monseer Chanel,' he pronounced both names with the utmost contempt.

'And they are both out now, I suppose,' suggested Doña Juanita suavely.

'On the river — in one of our boats.'

'Then,' said Doña Juanita, 'after I have seen whether I like the room you have given me, I think I shall go and sit in your charming garden for a little.'

'You wouldn't think it so charming if you had to weed it,' muttered tow-head as she went upstairs.

He was, however, no longer in the hall when Doña Juanita returned to pass through it on her way into the garden some twenty minutes later.

Idly she wandered about the flower-bordered paths for some time before she retired with her book to that summer-house wherein, only a few hours previously, Esteban had abandoned every idea of going his way without Nina Hanana. It was quite four o'clock before she heard voices and a boat came up the stream rowed by a pleasant-faced, dark-haired young man, and in which sat Nina de Segovia. Peering cautiously out from her retreat, Doña Juanita watched them land and saunter, after a few moments, into the house. After some little time, Doña Juanita went into the house herself.

3

Nina was in the middle of writing a long letter to Miss Sylvia Knox — for Ramon must now stay with them a little while longer — when there came a knock at the door of her sitting-room.

'Come in,' she said carelessly, and, continuing to scribble furiously, for she very much wanted to catch the evening post, if possible, she added, as the newcomer seemed to be standing just inside the door, dumb as Punch in his box, and neither advancing nor retreating, 'Please come right in — shut the door — and what do you want?'

A voice replied frigidly in the purest Castilian: 'I wish to speak to you, Nina Hanana.'

Startled, Nina turned round quickly. A fair-haired,

slim, and very elegantly tall woman stood just within the room, regarding her and it with a sovereign and glacial contempt she was at no pains to conceal.

Nina jumped to her feet. 'Who are you?' she cried.

'I am the mother of Esteban Valdez,' said Doña Juanita.

Nina shivered. 'The mother of Esteban,' she said, hardly above a whisper; for this was the first time she had ever laid eyes on that redoubtable Amazon. Then she added, 'Will you not be seated, Señora?'

Doña Juanita's hesitation was perfectly perceptible, but finally she crossed the room and, advancing to where Nina stood by the window, sat down on the cushioned seat under it. Nina, still standing with her back to the writing-table, waited to hear what she had come to say. But Doña Juanita, now that she had reached the moment of battle, seemed in no hurry to deploy upon the foe. For some moments she remained glancing curiously about the room. At last her inspection came to a question mark at the piano, upon which, on the top of a pile of music, lay Pierre Chanel's straw hat.

'You are not alone?' asked Doña Juanita politely.

Nina returned coolly: 'Monsieur Chanel is here — I am studying a new rôle with him — Delilah.'

'That,' said Doña Juanita sweetly, 'is so essentially a rôle one should study with a man, I imagine.'

Nina, whose eyes had been fixed on the floor, suddenly looked up. There was more than a gleam of anger in their somber depths.

'I do not think that Monsieur Chanel comes into what we have to say to each other,' she said.

Doña Juanita raised a delicate eyebrow. 'One never

knows — how or where a man makes his appearance,' she returned.

The inflection in her voice suggested that Monsieur Chanel was very much an affair of the moment.

Nina laughed. 'Quite true,' she admitted almost gayly, 'when one is young. After forty men do not trouble us so much. Their appearances, in short, Señora, too often become infrequent.'

Doña Juanita gulped. She had not expected so sudden a defiance.

'But I am sure you did not come here to lecture merely philosophically on men,' added Nina. 'Besides, I expect Monsieur Chanel back at any moment.'

Thus warned, Doña Juanita immediately opened a more direct fire. 'Is Monsieur Chanel,' she asked carelessly, 'aware that you and my son propose to elope together again?'

This was certainly a random shot, though based cleverly enough on a very accurate estimate of Esteban's character.

Nina stared at her. 'How did you know?' she asked. 'Did Esteban tell you — this morning?'

Quick to realize her advantage, Doña Juanita answered smoothly if evasively, 'What made me come to you, do you think, Madame de Segovia?'

Nina sighed. Really dismayed that Esteban should be already acting without consulting her — for he had confided no such intention to her, though they had discussed their future very completely and made many plans — Nina was conscious of a thrill of consternation. It alarmed her to know that he could leave her and so soon be confiding in the one woman who had been all along her greatest enemy.

Doña Juanita went on speaking: 'So I decided to come here myself and make an appeal to you.'

'Did he tell you, too, I was to be here till to-morrow?'

Said Doña Juanita: 'My son and I have few secrets from each other. And I beg you will have patience with me. Remember that Esteban is my son, and very dear to me.'

Nina turned to face her tormentor squarely. 'Let me tell you something,' she cried harshly. 'Nothing you could say could alter me. Esteban and I love each other. We are young — we have a right to happiness. You separated us, oh, very cleverly, I admit, four years ago, Señora, but this time we know each other better ——'

'Do you? Does a woman ever know a man?' The elder woman's voice held a fine skepticism which did not go unnoticed by Nina. 'Of course he has no intention — forgive my being so blunt — of marrying you.'

'Did he tell you that?' asked Nina.

Once more Doña Juanita abandoned the paths of truth. 'It was the first point on which I wished to be informed. You must not forget our Spanish ideas. We are not lax in the affairs of marriage, Señorita.' Deliberately she lingered over the delicate insult. 'But his last words to me were that in perhaps four weeks he would have news for me on the subject of his marriage.'

'With whom?'

Having thrown so serious a doubt on Esteban's intentions, it was but another step to make at this point an apparently impulsive confidence. Said Doña Juanita blandly, 'I do not know that I should tell you all this — if he has not.' She hesitated superbly; enough to convince Nina, at any rate, that there might be more than

a grain of truth in what she was saying. 'But I do not want to seem too, shall we say, arrogant. Surely — he should have told you — of his engagement ——'

'Engagement?'

'Yes — to an old playfellow of his — a girl he has known from childhood — Estella Diaz. She has always been devoted to Esteban. They will make a splendid couple.'

'Oh, I don't believe you!' cried Nina.

Doña Juanita nodded slowly. 'Believe it or not — as you will,' she said, 'that is the girl he will marry.'

Nina looked about the room wildly. Could it be possible? In her heart she knew the woman sitting there would stick at nothing to keep Esteban and herself apart. But — once before Esteban had treated her with a great want of openness. Might he not do it again? Agitatedly she stood there uncertain, full of misgivings; which Doña Juanita was not slow to perceive.

She continued: 'Have you ever thought what this will all mean to him — a scandal of the kind you are contemplating? It will ruin his life — he will have to live out of Spain — his diplomatic career will be ended before it is begun. And ask yourself this — will he not in time come to hate you?'

Said Nina passionately: 'Oh, don't you imagine I have thought of all that? Ever since last night I have been asking myself ——'

'There is only one possible answer,' interrupted Doña Juanita. 'You must make a great sacrifice — you must give him up.'

'No — no!' said Nina.

Doña Juanita having made her point, drove it

home. 'I am sure you cannot wish to ruin him,' she said.

But she was to find with Nina's next remark that the girl was not of the pliant type which vacates the field after the first shock of a cavalry charge on the part of the enemy. Yet Nina was very shaken by the last argument.

Said she, passionately: 'If I choose to risk it — surely that is my own affair. Esteban has been so unhappy without me ——'

Doña Juanita interrupted her contemptuously. 'Unhappy!' she repeated. 'Do you really think happiness is of any consequence — that kind of happiness?'

'We all want to be happy,' returned Nina bluntly. 'What are you fighting for just now, Madame?'

'Yes — and how few of us attain it? I am fighting for my son's future — since you put it so unceremoniously. He can have none with you.'

'Perhaps he is not really ambitious,' then suggested Nina, 'and I am sure I can make him happy.'

Doña Juanita laughed shortly. 'There you are either mad or deliberately turning your back on truth. How could you make my son happy when you don't possess one quality which helps to make a contented marriage? Why, the very way you dress used to irritate him.'

Nina became conscious suddenly of a profound melancholy.

'Remember he has tired of you once,' continued the relentless voice.

'But he still loves me after four dreary years of separation,' retorted Nina. 'And I am still young — and not too plain ——'

To this Doña Juanita replied with a flash of humor: '*Dios!* — we all know you as beautiful and talented; but it is not a beauty or a talent that we wish to see in our midst — daily.'

This back-handed compliment did not affect Nina at all. She was by this time resolutely facing her opponent. After all, Doña Juanita might not be right as to Esteban's wish for a career — and she was prepared to abandon her own. All the sacrifice could not be on one side.

'But you will hamper him everywhere,' said Doña Juanita.

'You have come on a vain mission,' said Nina. 'We love each other. That is all that matters. I will not give him up — now that I know he cares for me more than ever. And I do know it.'

Ruthlessly Doña Juanita cut the ground from under her feet. 'All that you say may be quite true to-day,' she admitted. 'We know distance often lends enchantment, and certainly separation is not in every case a cure. But what you do not realize — no, reckon with would be a better phrase — is the cold fact that first and last you have to reckon with the women of my world. Your decision should not be sentimental — it should be based on reason. For undoubtedly society in Spain — in your own country — will always give you the cold shoulder ——'

'And what do I care?'

Doña Juanita continued as though she had not heard: 'How could it be otherwise? You would have no position. As a famous cantatrice you would be one thing — as Esteban's' — she seemed to hesitate — '*inamorata*,

you would have to hide behind high walls. I can assure you of that.'

Nina shrugged her shoulders. 'You would, of course, see to it.'

Doña Juanita shook her head. 'I assure you, I should not have to raise a finger. It would be a problem that could only work out the one way. Come, cannot you look at this thing sensibly?'

Doña Juanita regarded the face of the singer almost benevolently, she was so far from displeased with her own eloquence. And finding that Nina was silent, she decided to continue on the same lines.

'In any case — your happiness' — she italicized the two words delicately — 'would be inevitably destroyed within two years at most. And what would you have gained, Madame de Segovia? Another ecstatic moment or two, at Ronda this time ——'

Shrewdly she glanced again at Nina's bent head and averted face and was well satisfied to see this new chance shot had told.

'Oh, the estate is very beautiful, and the old house a dream of loveliness — a perfect setting for a pair of lovers, I grant you that. But Esteban, with his energy, would never be content to remain there indefinitely — making love. What a waste of time and opportunity!' she declared warmly. 'For he possesses and has always possessed a thousand outside interests with which you could have nothing to do. Do you not remember how he left you in San Remo — all day and every day?'

'But that was your fault,' said Nina.

'Not altogether. I admit I helped — but sooner or later he would have gone back to his own people and his

own pursuits — no matter who had begged him to remain with you. And it would happen again; therefore, sooner or later there would be tears and recriminations — you would want him to take you out into society and he would have to refuse — and one day you would run away from it all as you did before.'

'Oh,' cried Nina, in a choked voice, 'I will not listen to you!'

'Unfortunately you cannot help it,' continued Doña Juanita's even tones. 'Besides, your own common-sense must tell you that what I am saying is true ——'

'I won't give up Esteban!' cried Nina. 'Love has nothing to do with common-sense.'

'There I agree with you,' returned Esteban's parent, faintly smiling. 'Yet you will — you must — give him up. Because it is not as if you had only yourself to consider.'

'Who else?' demanded Nina, astonished.

Secure now that victory in the end was assured, Doña Juanita could allow herself to play catlike with Nina, for some little time longer. She therefore regarded her with amused surprise.

'Salvatore Nicolini — for one.'

Nina was frankly puzzled. 'I do not understand you — what has he to do with it?'

Doña Juanita leaned forward to hurl her bolt. 'Are you not still greatly in his debt?'

'Who told you I was in his debt?'

Doña Juanita laughed. '*Chère* Madame, a child could do so easy a sum. A moment's thought convinced me that some one must have financed you — the circus could not have ensured you so considerable a sum, I am

afraid — and who but Nicolini would dare to risk so much? I do not know what Esteban may think,' she added pensively, 'when he finds that out. But perhaps you have told him of the debt.'

'No,' said Nina sullenly.

'Foolish — foolish,' Doña Juanita sighed. 'Esteban has very strict notions of honor. And how do you propose to pay Signor Nicolini?' she demanded sharply. 'That is, if you leave the operatic stage at the start of your career? Which you must do if you go back to Esteban — he would never allow you to continue to sing in public.'

Said Nina recklessly: 'I think you are the most detestable woman I have ever met! You have no heart, have you?'

Doña Juanita was quite unimpressed. 'Not for a girl like you,' she admitted. 'Keep to your own side of the hedge, Nina Hanana, and do not interfere with my affairs. Such women as you have no conscience. They live on every man they meet — they do not care what they make people suffer — how many lives they ruin — they go on taking — taking —— From women like you women like me must save their men.'

'I think you are frightfully unjust,' said Nina. 'I have always loved Esteban ——'

'You could demonstrate your love better by leaving him alone.'

'He sought me out.'

'You should have sent him away.'

'And if I won't, as you express it, leave him alone ——'

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Doña

Juanita got up from the window-seat. Without speaking she walked slowly the length of the room. At the door she turned.

'Since you seem to challenge me, Nina Hanana,' she said icily, 'let me warn you — I mean to separate you from my son. I understand you, too, have a son. Take care one day you do not find yourself bereft of the one being you really care for as well as — or even better than — Esteban.'

With that she was gone.

Pierre, coming in a quarter of an hour after from the village, whither he had gone to send Salvatore a telegram acquainting him with Nina's intention of returning to her hotel in London upon the next day, was amazed to find her in floods of tears.

'Why, Nina, darling,' he said, his voice full of concern, 'what is the matter?'

Nina continued to sob. 'My heart is broken; and I do wish you wouldn't leave your silly hat on the top of my piano,' she said between two bursts of tears.

Pierre did not attempt to conceal his astonishment at this totally unexpected attack. He had left Nina barely half an hour before in the gayest of spirits and the best of humors. Their picnic lunch on the river had been delightful. All day she had seemed so almost irresponsibly and childishly content with life. But listening to her now, something very sinister must have happened to destroy so completely her earlier animation and cheerfulness.

'My heart is broken' — who could have broken it — even temporarily — in so short a time, Pierre wondered — though he had to admit that throughout the day he

had been uneasily conscious of an unusual undercurrent of excited feeling in her; almost as though she awaited news of inexpressible importance to her or was making up her mind to take some momentous and secret new step. Therefore, while apparently noticing nothing, Pierre had watched her affectionately and quite apprehensively. In all her moods Nina fascinated him, but certainly at moments during the last few hours she had seemed almost fey. Now he took one look at her flushed and tear-stained face and said quietly:

'But, my dearest girl ——'

Nina did not wait to hear any more. 'Yes, yes, I know,' she retorted angrily, jumping up from the chair in which she had thrown herself despairingly after the departure of Doña Juanita from the scene, 'I know you've thrown your hat on my piano thousands of times before — but I'm a celebrated singer to-day and ought to be treated with more respect. And hats oughtn't to be — men's hats, I mean — flung carelessly about my living-rooms. It doesn't look well — one has to be dignified. Since you've been out, I've had a visitor ——'

'Oh,' said Pierre.

'A visitor who should never have set eyes on your hat ——'

'But it's quite clean and new,' he objected.

'*Madre de Dios!*' continued Nina tragically, 'I am constantly the victim of ill-luck. I don't doubt if I consulted the cards now — I should find spades everywhere. I assure you she has a tongue like a razor ——'

'She?'

'And I expect she's gone straight home to telegraph the news to all parts of the world by now.'

Apparently more at sea than ever, when Nina paused for breath Pierre inquired: 'What news?'

Nina stamped her foot. 'Why, that we are married — you and I. Or if we're not — we should be,' she flung tempestuously at him.

Pierre laughed — he could not help it. The whole thing was so unlike Nina. Since when had she bothered about appearances? What nonsense! As if all her friends did not know the integrity of her heart.

But again Nina was stamping her foot and crying passionately: 'Don't dare to laugh at me, Pierre!'

'Oh, la la, my dearest Nina,' said he and walked over to the piano. Thence he removed the offending head-gear and flung it into a corner of the room, behind a large pot of aspidistras. 'There,' he said; 'it's out of sight, at any rate.'

'But the mischief is done,' returned Nina gloomily.

'Probably not nearly as much as you think,' he said calmly, and, sitting down on the long mahogany music-bench, he began to play Debussy's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, a composition Nina at first had hated, but now admired as much as Pierre did.

Meanwhile, undecided whether to continue to storm at him or to indulge in another good cry, Nina ended by removing herself to her favorite spot, the window-seat, and sat there in silence looking out over the garden to the gently flowing river and frowning heavily. The faun's adventures filled the air musically.

After some time, Pierre said: 'Nina, darling, won't you tell me what is troubling you so much?'

But this was just what she had been feeling she couldn't possibly do. Pierre was altogether too dear

and kind to hurt so much as any confidence of this sort must surely do.

'Oh, how I wish I could!' she said wistfully, 'but I can't, Pierre. You would never quite understand ——'

Pierre, his fingers still busily weaving Debussy's fantastic imaginings, smiled; a cheerful, indulgent smile. He had seen a new name in the day book downstairs, and, adding two and two together ——

'Shall I tell you a little story, Nina *mia?*' he asked. 'It won't take long. Then you shall judge if I can help you, or not.'

Perhaps it was a certain gravity in his air which made Nina say, fearfully, for she knew herself to be very fond of Pierre: 'You frighten me.'

'No need,' he returned. 'Come, I will begin the tale as all tales should begin —— Once upon a time there was a very beautiful girl and she fell in love ——'

'So many do,' murmured Nina.

'It is a way beautiful girls have,' he admitted, 'and possibly she managed to fall in love with the wrong man. Also a habit — regrettable, too — that young and ardent spirits have. They do not weigh consequences, my Nina. In any case this beauty's adored one — oh, a very attractive and handsome fellow, one must concede that — possessed a patrician mamma of an indomitable temper who did not approve of her son's choice. Therefore, as soon as she could she came between the two ——'

'Ah,' said Nina on a deep sigh, 'then you know about Esteban and Doña Juanita — and me?'

'I have known for a long time,' returned Pierre gently — under his fingers the little faun, tired out with his

emotions, was falling asleep once more — 'for a long time, dear Nina,' he said again, 'and last night when the Duque de Ventura arrived — I knew at once ——'

He hesitated and fell silent — the faun, too, fell asleep — and remained with his long slender fingers resting lightly on the keys of the piano.

Nina made a tragic gesture. 'I don't know what to do!' she cried. 'It is his mother who has just been here — she threatened terrible things ——'

Pierre rose from the piano and, going to a kind of sideboard near the fireplace, poured himself out a glass of water from a cut-glass jug which was standing there on a small tray. Returning to the piano with the glass of water, he drank quite half of it before he put it down and began again to play — this time Bach. Tirelessly he weaved fugue and counter-fugue.

'You intend to marry el Duque de Ventura?' he asked at last, not looking at her.

Nina began to cry hopelessly again. 'I dare not,' she wailed.

'Dare not?' demanded Pierre.

'Yes — dare not,' repeated Nina.

'Why not? — since he has asked you, I suppose. Though when he could have managed it is a mystery. He must be a singularly clever young man.'

But though he spoke with studied lightness, his eyes were full of trouble.

'This morning I thought it was all settled,' said Nina. 'That was why I was so happy.'

'And this evening you find his mother thinks differently?'

Nina nodded. 'After all,' she added, 'why should he

bother to marry me? I am not of his world. When you come right down to it, I suppose I have nothing to offer him — as she said.'

'But — if he loves you?'

Nina, drying her eyes, returned mournfully: 'Love does not last.'

'There I don't agree with you,' said Pierre. 'Love changes, but unfortunately or fortunately — whichever way you like to put it — one always returns to one's first love. It is strong as death. Who was it said, "Many waters cannot quench love"? He was quite right. Take me, for instance. I shall love you, Nina, till I die.'

'I don't deserve it in the least,' she murmured.

'And that's probably what you feel about your Esteban,' pursued Pierre, perfectly tranquilly.

'But I cannot be so sure of him,' she sighed.

On a sudden minor phrase in the variations he was playing, Pierre said abruptly, 'You have Ramon to think of, you know.'

Nina came over to the piano and leaned on it.

'Yes,' she said, 'and that is why I must make up my mind to let him go — Esteban, I mean — for Doña Juanita threatens to do something dreadful to my darling baby. If anything happened to him, I should die.'

'But that is ridiculous,' retorted Pierre. 'We do not live in the fifteenth century.' And gently, very subtly, he began to question Nina till he could reconstruct the whole painful interview. Then he said: 'Yes — she means mischief, I am afraid. And none of us wants a scandal — perhaps even a tragedy. Such women as Doña Juanita stop at nothing. But why don't you go to the Duke and tell him the truth?'

Nina by this time had, however, reached the point when further resistance seemed to be futile. 'She is too strong for me,' she replied. 'I am really afraid of her, Pierre.' Again she hid her face in her hands and began to cry. 'I am terribly unhappy and I did so want to be taken care of. Just for a little time to have no worries — what would I not give for peace?'

That sudden, underlying childishness in Nina always vanquished those who loved her.

Said Pierre softly: 'Nina, darling, do not cry so. It tears my heart to hear it. If you cannot marry this man — who has already in the past made you so miserable — could you not think kindly of some one else who loves you? Who would give his life to make you happy? Or would it be all too impossible for you?'

Through her tears Nina regarded him affectionately. 'I am very fond of you,' she said. 'But I should be doing you the greatest wrong, perhaps — when my heart is Esteban's.'

Pierre stretched out his right hand and pulled her down on the music-bench beside him.

'Listen, Lovely,' he said. 'I am unfortunately like yourself a very faithful soul. You know quite well how much I adore you — to be your husband and have the right to take care of you would mean a great deal to me. You should have a shoulder on which to lean — you must not give up your career — and there is Ramon to be considered. He and I, too, are great friends. All that is important, Nina.'

Nina laid her head on his shoulder wearily. 'Yes, I know.'

'Think it over seriously. And remember I shall always be there — waiting patiently ——'

'Dear Pierre — you don't know what a comfort you are to me.'

'Perhaps not a very heroic figure,' he went on, 'but a good buttress to put between you and the world.'

Intentionally he continued to talk to her, half humorously, half tenderly: of what he could do to help her; how he could ensure that no harm should come to Ramon. And insensibly Nina, compounded of so much affection and impulse, began to answer to this genial, warm-hearted attitude of his. She knew very well she could always depend on Pierre. And why not accept this far more unselfish love? After all, she was very fond of him and she was tired of emotion — the kind that Esteban made her suffer. Suppose she did defy Doña Juanita and in the end everything went wrong. She knew she could not face Esteban's coldness twice. With her head on Pierre's shoulder as he played one soft melody after another, Nina pondered. If she could have only known how anxious and wretched Pierre was for all his practical and self-confident air; how fearful that some too damaging blow might strike her to the ground before he could really maneuver himself into a position to shield her!

It was with the very greatest relief, that as they sat out in the garden after supper in the moonlight, he heard at last the sentence he had been praying for.

'Dear Pierre,' said Nina, after a long silence as she slipped her hand in his, 'I think if you will have me I will marry you. Because I'm certainly very fond of you — and you will be kind to me, I know. Also you will certainly prevent me from ruining all our lives.'

Thus Esteban, coming eagerly to the George Inn two days after, found emptiness and silence.

Madame de Segovia had been gone since Sunday, he was told.

Hurrying up to town on the Tuesday morning, he read in the 'Times' a short account of her marriage the day before to Pierre Chanel.

Doña Juanita, chatting lightly with Madame Gebirge after the musical 'at home' she gave her friends toward the end of the week, heard, with a faint smile, from that good-natured Teuton a vivid description of the suddenly decided on romantic wedding which had parted Nina forever from a now utterly silent Esteban.

'The best-looking and the most radiant couple I have seen for a long time,' said Manja. 'And last night she sang Carmen more gorgeously than ever.'

In the autumn of that year Doña Juanita's labors on her son's behalf seemed finally crowned with success. For on the day the Song-Bird left Europe on her first and perhaps most successful South American tour, the Duque de Ventura married Estella Diaz in the great cathedral at Seville, the occasion being a very impressive one, full of color and pomp.

Retiring to her villa in the hills above Nice for some weeks of repose and recuperation, events having at last turned out so propitiously, Doña Juanita did not neglect to burn many candles — composed of the best wax — to divers heavenly authorities whose coöperation in the tasks she had set herself she had so steadily urged for a considerable period. Now all was satisfactorily settled and more than one altar blazed with light in consequence, a sign that Doña Juanita could breathe again.

Meanwhile, beside an adoring Miss Sylvia and Miss Daphne Knox, already accustomed with the ease of childhood to his new surroundings, Ramon had begun to ride a pony of his own through the autumn-tinted Worcestershire lanes and woods, as well as to take boxing lessons. Further, though perhaps not so gayly, he was endeavoring also to master the first rudiments of a distinctly liberal education.

CHAPTER VII

I

Lost in the memories of days long past, the Song-Bird continued to sit for a long time at her writing-table in the window of her music-room high above the street in that new and expensive block of studio apartments which faced Central Park at its southern end.

She was thinking now that, even after five years of widowhood, she missed Pierre enormously. Wrapped up as he had always been in her and her success, though his own celebrity as a musician had marched with hers, he had been in the widest sense of the word her devoted friend as well as her indulgent husband. Of his tenderness for Ramon there had never been the slightest doubt. The boy owed him and gave him a son's trust and affection. The three of them had lived unforgettably happy days together.

'And not many women can own their husbands gave them no anxiety and remained the lover to the end,' she reflected. 'He had the trick, too, of making every day interesting. He invested the simplest occasions with a kind of glamour. Now, without him, everything seems chill and flat, and will always be so, I suppose.'

She sighed unhappily as she remembered those years after the war, full of success, yet always shot with a strange undercurrent of anxiety. For Pierre had never quite recovered from the effects of those four years of strife; the first two on the French front, the last two spent in a German prison camp. And though he had

returned thankfully to civilian life, not so severely wounded that he could not take up his musical career again and to all appearance the same genial, eager soul he had always been, yet Nina knew too well how much he suffered from that black depression which was the tragic fate of so many of the returned fighting men; as though life had slipped away from them and it was impossible to recapture any real zest for living. Year by year she recognized with increasing trouble he had less hold on things, less desire to continue the trying business of existence in a too changed and standardized world, whence fancy and feeling were being steadily banished and a merely mechanical formula substituted for older, less mechanized ways of thought and action.

'What do I care about plumbing, Ninetta?' he had asked. 'That is not as frightfully important as every one seems to think to-day. And if we have nothing but eugenic children, they will be as stupid as oxen. To-day we seem to live for money and rapid transit only. I am glad I am not just beginning life.'

And a sudden attack of pneumonia, which had terminated fatally, after a week's illness in Mexico City toward the end of Nina's season there in 1923, he obviously embraced as a way of escape from conditions he was finding too incomprehensible and hard.

'What is it to die, Nina, darling?' he had whispered. 'To go on to something far more restful. Don't grieve too much for me — I have been so very tired for so long.'

It was that time of trial and parting which had finally robbed Nina of all her earlier gayety of spirit and turned her into the aloof, indifferent woman of to-day; though

perhaps she was to become because of it incomparably the greater artist.

'Dear Pierre,' she sighed, 'what should I have done without you? You were the kindest, most considerate of men in all this wide and weary world. I, too, am tired now. I wonder if I valued you enough.'

The sudden opening of the door at the end of the long room roused her from her not too happy musings.

A moment after, the penetrating voice of Manja Gebirge called out: 'What are you dreaming about there so deeply, Nina? On your birthday, too. Many happy returns.'

The Song-Bird glanced round to smile at her. 'Thanks, dear Manja,' she said. 'I was dreaming of old days. Sometimes I drift back to those times when I was not — what I am to-day.'

Manja came up to her and kissed her. 'Not too wise, *Liebchen*,' she returned affectionately. 'It is better to look ahead than back, I think. Though Heaven knows I have far more years behind me than before. I have brought you a present,' she added, thrusting a square box on the table before Nina with one of her brusque movements.

Except that the passage of years had added slightly to her girth and very considerably to the artificiality of her appearance, Manja Gebirge at sixty-two looked very much as she had looked at forty-six. Affectionately regarded by the public in several countries as the last of the Olympians of song, the critical cohorts in the lands, as well as her musical *confrères*, were amazed at her ever-abounding vitality and the remarkable survival of her still beautiful voice. Many a younger singer

might have envied her its range and freshness, and the enthusiasm of her public. Her art was by this time, like Cæsar's spouse, beyond newspaper comment.

Having endowed Nina with what turned out to be a most elaborate manicure set of tortoise-shell and gold, and having amiably received Nina's suitable expressions of rapture and thanks, she lowered herself into a large armchair in the window embrasure.

'Well, well,' she said. 'I hope you'll find it useful. You have practically everything, and I could think of nothing else. Besides, I was getting one for myself at the time and just remembered to-day was your birthday ——'

'I'm not going to have any more after this year,' Nina volunteered.

Manja laughed. 'I've just begun them again,' she said. 'My public loves to picture me as something the elephant brought out of the Ark. It makes me seem so Neolithic. Actually they would get more of a thrill, I fancy sometimes, if I appeared on the concert platform dressed in skins, and carrying more and better implements of stone, bone, and horn.'

She reached across and took from Nina's new possession a nail file, which she began to use abstractedly. 'It's Ramon's birthday, too. When do you expect him from Washington?' she asked.

Nina had barely remarked, 'He should be here by now,' when the door opened again and a young man — his arms full of roses — rushed into the room and up to Nina.

'A happy birthday, dearest of mothers!' he cried gayly, and, hurling the mass of flowers on her table,

embraced her with tremendous violence. 'I could eat you, Nina!' he cried. 'How I've lived away from you for six months is more than I can tell.' And he kissed her again.

'And to you, too, darling,' said Nina.

At the same moment they both said, 'I have a present for you!'

'But you must look at mine first,' cried Ramon, and began to rummage in the pockets of his overcoat. Finally he pulled out a leather case. 'Look, ladies and gentlemen — of whom I perceive there are at the moment none present. Surprising, Nina!'

'Salvatore is coming to lunch.'

'And there's my first love, Manja — I'm coming over to kiss you in a minute,' he announced. 'Gosh! it's grand to be back again ——'

'And have you your pilot's license?' interrupted Nina.

Ramon nodded. 'I can take you all up any time now.'

All this time he had been holding the case at arm's length. 'Look,' he commanded them. 'I press a spring, and what do we behold? — A bracelet for Nina!'

Suiting the action to the speech, the cover of the case flew open.

Nina looked at it gravely. 'Haven't you made a mistake?' she asked. 'That's no bracelet, Ramon.'

He regarded the piece of jewelry lying on its satin bed for a moment. Then he shut it away. 'You're right,' he said, without the slightest trace of embarrassment. 'That's not what I was bringing you — my error. That is for ——'

'Some one else,' giggled Nina. 'Oh, Ramon, can't you distinguish between your mother and your sweetheart?

Who is she? That looked very like a pendant to me.' And she began picking the roses off her correspondence.

Meanwhile Ramon had again dived into his pockets. 'Here it is,' he said, and brought out a second extremely impressive-looking affair of morocco leather. 'Behold the bracelet — and with so much love, dear Nina.' He caught her right hand and clasped the charming toy about her wrist.

'Diamonds!' said Nina. 'Darling Ramon, you shouldn't do it. It is a sin to waste so much money on me.'

'It's a sin I shall commit again then, *Madre mia*,' he returned firmly. 'And now,' he declared, taking off his overcoat, 'I'm going to put your flowers in water and kiss Manja.'

'But first of all you must see what I have for you,' cried Nina.

The watch she gave him he received with the greatest enthusiasm. 'Just what I wanted — it was splendid our choosing the same day for a birthday, wasn't it? How did you know I'd smashed my old watch?'

Manja, watching his engaging ways with Nina and his genuine delight at being with his mother again, began to wonder how much truth there was in the tale she had heard of his recent adventures in Washington. But for the untoward little incident of his almost presenting Nina with the wrong birthday gift, she would have been inclined to discount it entirely. At any rate, Nina had heard nothing to disturb her peace of mind. And clearly attributed no importance to his having a present in his coat pocket for some other, perhaps equally dear, woman, Manja reflected.

The arrival of Salvatore with more flowers and a pair of antique paste shoe-buckles for her to wear upon the stage as Carmen, plus a new contract for Nina to sign, pushed the little *contretemps* yet farther into the background.

At lunch, as usual, they all talked animatedly and more or less at once, Ramon's aviation adventures, which had been for the past six months as the sands of the sea for multitude, becoming inextricably mixed up with an account Manja was richly embroidering of a recent concert, at which she had been one of the chief artists, given in their private hall at some fashionable girls' school in Connecticut. It transpired that no effort had been spared to make the occasion as imposing to the visiting musical celebrities as to the remarkably youthful audience.

'I only wish you could have seen them, Nina,' finished Madame Gebirge. 'Only your concert days won't begin for a long time yet. They certainly were the cutest little things — all silk stockings and knees, and the minutest of white frocks with turquoise-colored belts of leather, and still shorter hair. And such tiny bones — all brought up on salads, I expect.'

Ramon gurgled. 'You make them sound very perishable goods,' he said.

'Little specks on the surface of the world,' she continued. 'Well, there they were — all at the beginning of their journey. Poor little dears. And so thrilled if some one dropped a hint that we considered them the last word in — what is it they call it? — Oh, yes, sophistication. And what kind of ballast is that for a long and toilsome voyage? Really, they've acquired a small

smattering of learning, and about as much knowledge of the vast force called life as a kitten, I suppose. But it was very pleasant to watch them chasing their little tails, and using quite long words.'

Salvatore smiled at her. 'My dear Manja,' he remarked dryly, 'don't you know that to-day we possess short cuts to everything? Even life, so they tell me. I only wish you could watch the way the young come to me to talk about their voices — speaking already as glibly about a career as you and I might about eating a piece of bread and butter. And then' — he shook his head and hesitated for a brief moment before he went on — 'if one dares to tell them the truth as to the enormous toil before them — the raised eyebrow, the open scorn. No, no; they have not the slightest intention of studying — not as you and Nina did, or Jean de Reszke, *par exemple*, who could take the immense pains to change his baritone to a tenor and make every detail of his part perfect. Ah, that is a little too like work, *parbleu!* Therefore the short cut is indicated. What matter that they most certainly lose the voice — whatever it may be — before they are far in the forties?'

'They will not admit that we reach the forties inevitably, most of them,' said Nina.

'In any case for such superficial singers, there will not even be a silver jubilee.'

Manja helped herself to some more chicken salad. 'Thank Heaven,' she remarked piously, 'I do not sing to-day. But it's true enough, what you are saying there, Salvatore. I often think that the first young woman with a really good voice, and a healthy frame, who studies faithfully, will sweep the board. She will be

what they call here a wow. And will continue to wow gloriously for many years.' She nodded forcefully at him. 'Yet mark my words — the words of old Manja, who has seen so much in her time — she will probably be a German *Mädchen*. For in that country we still understand hard work and patience. Also we never give up. And there is no better recipe for success in any calling — am I not right?'

Tranquilly she looked at Nicolini for corroboration.

Instantly responsive to a subject which was so close to his heart, he confirmed her assertion. 'Indisputably,' he said.

'Still I do not ask that people should pretend to be musical,' she went on amusedly. 'I much prefer to find them honest. Then one knows where one is. Not every one is born with a musical sense.'

She glanced at the three sitting at the round table, now eating ice cream, and began to chuckle.

'I wish you could have seen one frankly adorable child in that gymnasium or hall — whatever they called it — that evening of our concert. She was just plain bored — it got to be quite a joke amongst the four of us behind the scenes. And when each one of us was not on the platform, we would peep at those children sitting so politely at attention in rows. They had hung the stage, I suppose you might call it, with some kind of thick gray stuff — oh, very bad for the voice, but artistic, and the latest style, you understand — and we would all take a peep once in so often. Well, there she was — in a corner huddled up on some kind of a long beam or mast at the side of the hall — Heaven knows what it was — and sleeping most peacefully through

the affair. *Herr Gott!* I could have rushed out and kissed the rosebud.'

She glanced at the attentive Ramon out of the corner of her heavily made-up and shrewd old eyes. 'You would have liked her,' she said. 'Yes, it was a rosebud and a minx, too, or I miss my guess.'

Nina asked: 'Did she sleep all through the programme?'

'Till I sang "The Two Grenadiers,"' returned Manja. 'That woke her up, as I intended it to. In fact, I sang the song at her, the monkey. So at the last we saw the color of her eyes — such big blue ones. When it was over, she clapped with the rest, and screwed the eyes up, and winked at me. Real character there, eh, Salvatore?'

Salvatore Nicolini, enjoying a vigorous old age and, but for his totally white beard and hair, looking very little older than he had when Nina made her début at Covent Garden, laughed heartily.

'It would seem so,' he nodded. 'And real character is valuable — everywhere.'

It appeared, however, that Madame Gebirge had but the vaguest notion of its position on the map. 'You see,' she explained, 'we were motored there, and it was a dark, wintry evening. You know very well what February can be like here. Then we were motored back after the concert. I really never saw the place properly at all. I sang — and I had a good supper — and I met some of the faculty, as well as a class or two of the children — I said all the pretty things expected of me — and we all piled into the motor, and for my part, I slept all the way home. So did Leone — when he found

I wouldn't talk to him. That man plays the fiddle divinely.'

Salvatore shrugged his shoulders. 'Bojer Nordstrom doesn't take half as good care of his artists as I did when I was in the business,' he remarked dryly.

Nina blew him a kiss across the flower-decorated lace cloth. 'That's why I won't hear of any one but you managing me, dear Salvatore,' she said affectionately. 'With you one travels *en prince*.'

'And I shall, I hope, continue to look after you, dear Nina, till I depart hence to manage probably the latest arrivals in heavenly solo singers,' he returned promptly.

It was when they were all back in the music-room once more that Ramon volunteered an account of an accident he had suffered a month or two previously. It seemed that, accompanying a friend in his plane, the machine had come to grief in the grounds of some scholastic establishment in Connecticut.

'I wonder if it could have been the same school as yours, Manja?'

'Why not?' said she, taking the coffee-cup he handed her.

'What were you doing up there?' asked Nina. 'I have been picturing you in Washington for the last six months.'

'I — we — were on the way to Boston,' explained Ramon. 'But the engine suddenly died on us and there was nothing to do but plane down — if we could. Fortunately we were over what looked like a park at the time, and we came to ground in a good-sized field. A bit bumpy but, fortune being with us, we landed all right ——'

'And what happened then?' asked Nina. 'Ramon, darling, I'm not sure I like this urge you have to fly so continually about the world. Hasn't the ground any allure for you? The fact is, it's just as anxious work for a poor mother to know her boy is roaring through the skies at all hours of the day or night as to send him to war. Just as much risk, it seems to me.'

Ramon came and sat on the edge of her chair to fling an affectionate arm about her elegant slimness. 'But, Nina,' he returned earnestly, 'consider — it's my career just as much as your voice is yours.'

Nina sighed. 'Yes, I know — that's one accusation you can never bring against me. I've never stood in your light because I was afraid. There — go on with your story. We are all in the hands of *le Bon Dieu*.'

Ramon bent and kissed her. 'You're a mother in a thousand, Nina,' he said. 'To proceed — I left old Mac looking over the damage and wandered up to a house that wasn't far away. It turned out to be some kind of a gymnasium. Lots of girls doing all kinds of stunts. I had quite a time looking through a window till one of them spied me.'

'And then?' asked Salvatore, puffing contentedly at his cigar.

'A very young and rather massive-looking instructor came out of the door and, in a deep voice asked my business. When I told her we'd more or less crashed — she was more sympathetic; though not markedly so. Seemed to think we might have chosen some other spot on which to come down. Finally she let me use the 'phone; and I got a mechanic out, and between the three of us we patched up the engine and, *alla longa*, made Boston.'

Manja's thoughts still hovering about the odd incident of the really lovely turquoise and pearl pendant she had glimpsed for so brief a moment before lunch, she could not help remarking wickedly: 'That was the proper way to start a fine romance. A girls' school and a young man asking for help, eh? Could there be a more dramatic opening? Was there no young lady amongst those chattering little sparrows who stood out at all?'

It struck her that Ramon's laugh was a trifle self-conscious. 'I wasn't allowed to get near any of them—though they did bring us out sandwiches and coffee before we went off. But it was an amusing experience.'

Salvatore, however, cutting across the conversation now to inquire if Nina sang Carmen at the Metropolitan the week following, the subject dropped, and soon after Manja, hoisting herself up from her stout armchair, declared she must be on her way to an afternoon function at the other end of town.

'Some swell party in Washington Square,' she announced.

Driving away at last with Salvatore down Fifth Avenue at the usual post-meridian snail's pace, she asked him abruptly: 'Do you know who this girl is with whom Ramon is supposed to have fallen so violently in love — his father all over again? Leone told me Washington was buzzing with it. I understand she is the niece of one of the diplomats there.'

2

Not only the niece of one of the diplomats accredited to Washington, as Manja had heard, but as live a wire as the world expects to find its youth to-day; though at

the moment Rosita Fontana-Broughton was lying upon her bed in an upper room of her grandmother's house in Washington Square, crying her eyes out just as any old-fashioned girl might have done faced with a like disappointment. For she was in the throes of her first and most clandestine romance, one, too, that none of her immediate circle would have credited her with, and was in consequence experiencing a heart crisis of the profoundest nature. Moreover, that, for the last couple of days, she had been, so to speak, driven into exile and made almost a complete prisoner was entirely due to the fact that with the easy optimism of youth she had, after six weeks' deft maneuvering, finally underrated the acute perceptions and the never-sleeping hawk eye of that most disagreeable relative, Doña Juanita Valdez, the mother-in-law of her late Aunt Estella, and a crushing defeat of all her gay strategy had been her bitter portion.

Blue-eyed Rosita had found it all very hard to bear. But the fact was, wrapped up in her new, delightful mystery of meetings and partings, stolen interviews and all the glamorous paraphernalia of young love, she had at last forgotten the real world in which she daily moved; had failed to continue her earlier precautions, with the result that after an overwhelming half-hour of sermon and prophecy on the part of her coldly amazed Aunt Juanita, she had been sent back by express to her paternal grandmother at a moment's notice and in complete disgrace. Many and various telegraphic communications had subsequently kept the wires warm between Washington and New York; communications of which she had not been allowed to know the import. She had

not even been allowed to appeal to her Uncle Esteban — who would have understood everything. While as for Doña Juanita — every one knew she was compact of steel.

'But to rush me from Washington in the middle of everything without any warning — making me look such a thorough fool — that I can't forgive. Just when we'd got three weeks' extra holidays because of our scarlet fever epidemic at Freedlands,' she wailed. 'It's too much. What does Aunt Juanita think she is?'

'Then you shouldn't have let her get on to your game,' returned her cousin unsympathetically.

Perched on the arm of a chair, she alternately surveyed indifferently the woe-begone figure on the bed and the picturesque spaces of the Square below.

'Come on — cheer up. You'll see him again, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Not if Aunt Juanita can help it.'

'Though,' pursued Miss Lulu reflectively, 'I can't think how you managed to romp off with him at Freedlands, where we're in the public eye all day. Who could he have been? But as you won't tell even me who he is — of course he's impossible.'

'I wish Great-Aunt Juanita was dead,' sobbed the disconsolate Rosita fiercely.

Again her cousin turned a coldly efficient eye on the bundle of misery.

'Don't be a fool,' she said sharply. 'If I were in your place, I'd plan how I could get the better of her. That would be fun, I should think. Why bother about the opinions of a mere great-aunt? She's too monumental.'

'I don't know where he lives — and if Aunt Juanita heard you say that, she'd throw a couple of fits.'

'Let her. She's not my relative.' Miss Lulu was devastatingly indifferent. 'Now listen, Rosita,' she went on; 'since you are here and they're all hot on your trail, I'd lay low for a bit. You'd much better go in for a touch of diplomacy. Deceiving your nearest and dearest can't mean much in your young life. And to-day it's every one for herself. Only if you get him — watch out he isn't after your strong box. But for some reason of her own, Aunt Juanita is terrified to have you remain in Washington or New York. She even wanted you sent to your dad's place in Florida. I heard my dad tell Mother that. And he said he'd be relieved when Uncle Charles and Aunt Rosita got back from Spain and could take you off somewhere. You're too much of a responsibility, my girl.'

'So here I am — packed off like a cabin trunk — not wanted on voyage.' The bitterness of her tone was indescribable.

Her cousin shrugged her shoulders. 'Even Grandmother, who is mostly human, is putting on airs. What did you do exactly in Washington?' And Miss Lulu Fontana-Broughton, only child and heiress of George Fontana-Broughton, the spaghetti king, here allowed a not unreasonable curiosity to overcome her earlier note of modernistic philosophy.

Rosita Fontana-Broughton, her cousin and junior by one year, also an only child and equally to be an heiress in the future when it should please a benign Providence to remove her papa, Charles Fontana-Broughton — oil-well Fontana — from actively superintending his lubri-

cant interests in two hemispheres, on hearing this very pertinent question emitted a noise that even to the most unprejudiced ear must have appeared as something between a snort and a gurgle. Then:

'I flew with a young man ——' she confessed simply.

'The young man, of course. Without Aunt Juanita knowing anything about it?' Miss Lulu's tone was frankly admiring.

'More than once.'

Returning to the burning question of Rosita's beau, Lulu asked: 'What kind of a young man is he?'

Replied her cousin: 'Oh, a nice-ish kind of guy. And, sweet mamma! how good looking, Lulu! He has a nose like a Greek god. So I called him Sir Galahad.'

A little hazy as to her Greek mythology, Lulu left the implication unchallenged.

'Where did you fly?'

'In the air, of course. Where does one usually fly?'

Becoming slightly more magisterial, Miss Lulu now was heard to ask: 'Alone?'

Rosita, deep in her pillows and her reminiscences, affected to consider. 'Yes, but for a little custard-colored cat called Rumpus. I really might have known it was an omen for me. But Sir Galahad always takes it up for luck when he has a passenger he likes — well, a whole lot.'

'Does that occur often?'

This was not so pleasant a thought and Rosita remained thoughtfully silent.

After a moment her cousin spoke again: 'Then that's the reason of your flat tire and your having to walk home from the ride. I suppose you found it worth

it. But you take my advice now. Come downstairs to Grandmother's blowout. Don't encourage her complex about your behavior — at her age.'

A smothered groan from the bed on which the melancholy Rosita still lay preceded her mutinous 'Gosh! at this or any age, she's fierce. And why should I bore myself meeting her ancient pals?'

'And I suppose you expect me to continue to sit up here with you, Rose, holding your hand.'

Rosita jerked herself to a sitting position. 'No, I don't. You go on down. It's your home, not mine, thank Heaven. On the whole, I shan't be sorry when Dad and Mummy get back — I can manage them. But nobody need think I'm going to spill Sir Galahad's real name — though I don't mind telling you it's quite well known. I bet Grand'mère put you up to pumping me.'

Hurriedly her cousin entered a denial.

'And if the kind of highbrow music spiel they've got downstairs to-day is a knockout with you, Lulu,' she continued morosely, 'it's a very recent development — that's all I've got to say.' Her tone was sulkily suspicious. 'Why, last term you slept through that high-voltage concert just as much as I did — though the fat old Martha on the stage caught me out.'

To this cascade of eloquent upbraiding, Miss Lulu replied with caution, for, though she would not have had her realize it for the world, part of her cousin's reproaches in point of fact were true enough. She had been entrusted with the task of finding out all she could about the young man who, Doña Juanita considered, had made Rosita's name a byword amongst her friends and acquaintances: and the girl only sixteen and still at

school! Yes, Lulu reflected uneasily, she was a kind of unofficial police agent. Yet in her heart she was all on Rosita's side. The whole affair sounded splendidly exciting to her. Some thrill in it. And, as she had said earlier, she would personally have been, placed in the same circumstances, good and ready to play up Doña Juanita every way she knew. Now, reproached as she was by her cousin, of whom she was at bottom exceedingly fond, she continued, hurriedly:

'It isn't a knockout with me, every day in the week. But if you'd lived in this house as long as I have you'd find, to get along at all, you'd have to concede something. Mother and Grand'mère are just seething with superiority complexes. And I tell you, Rosie, I've had to fight like a wildcat for the simplest things — my latchkey and my freedom.'

And, producing the latest article in lipsticks from some obscure hiding-place about her person, she began assiduously to improve Nature's handiwork in the matter of her mouth — which was inclined to be large and good-humored — with the most concentrated attention.

Rosita opened her blue eyes widely. 'Need you dance attendance on them this afternoon? Can't you pass up this particular affair?'

To this appeal Lulu returned briskly: 'But I rather want to look it over. That singer who came to Freedlands to show us how grand highbrow stuff is — well, she's to be here to-day. She's an old friend of Grand'mère's. And I want to collect off her an autograph for Tony Fisher.'

'Oh, need you?'

'Well, he gave me his frat pin — and one must do something. For some reason he's keen on autographs. I suggested giving him mine, but strange to say he didn't enthuse over the offer.'

'Oh,' said Rosita, 'that does surprise me.'

Tickled with their own wit, both girls giggled. After another few moments Rosita sighed heavily, sat up suddenly, and, swinging silk-stockinged legs over the side of the bed, announced that she supposed she might as well be got up for the sacrifice and go downstairs to the music fans with Lulu.

'But I wish,' she added pensively, 'all the ancients would realize I'm not so young as I look. Gosh, wouldn't you suppose they'd guess I'd acquired some technic by this time? Yessir — I know my way about. I haven't lived so much in Aunt Juanita's house for nothing.'

Rising languidly, she moved to the door, opened it, and, calling out, 'Oh, Amy, I've changed my mind — come and help me dress. Quick!' returned to the neighborhood of the facial artist in the window. Taking up a critical position before her, she contemplated her cousin's handiwork.

'You've got far too much color on, Lulu,' she said at last. 'I don't believe that kind of red goes with your type. You're too healthy-looking to be exotic.' She endured the perfectly appalling face her cousin made on hearing this pronouncement with admirable fortitude. 'You needn't agree with me. I'm all for broad-mindedness — but I still keep my opinion,' she giggled. 'And I'll tell the Cosmos Aunt Juanita isn't too much of a saint herself. She's pretty smooth. But she just ad-

mires to interfere. Did you know she stopped Uncle Esteban once from marrying some one he was all set to elope with? But she won't get away with that twice. No-sir, she's not going to ruffle this baby.'

The door now opening to admit the passage of Amy, a comfortably stout and elderly colored maid who had been in the service of the Broughton family for the best part of twenty-five years, and in consequence knew their idiosyncrasies backward, Rosita dismissed her present preoccupations to concentrate on the always engrossing problem of — what the woman should wear. With such excellent results that Manja Gebirge, sitting in a seat of honor near her hostess and her handsome, worldly daughter-in-law — who had once been Lulu Scott and the belle of her native Middle-Western home town before she had made the best match of any of her contemporaries — had to admit that the two young things who drifted up to them — all wide-eyed and engagingly *mondaine* in tone — were exceedingly good to look upon. She was delighted to find in the younger cousin, dropping her schoolgirl curtsy, though not her honest blue eyes, the fascinating little monkey of whom she had been speaking at Nina's luncheon table.

3

Nina, coming into her studio the next morning to practice scales religiously, about eleven o'clock, found her secretary and accompanist not yet arrived and Ramon telephoning busily, seated on the massive oak and leather-covered writing-table.

'How did you dig me up?' she heard him demand airily, then add with a laugh, 'Good old Manja — but

I guess she didn't know what she was doing, Honey. Ah, there goes the cloven hoof, I'm afraid. Well, aren't you the brilliant detective or sleuth? Yes, I'll be at the Museum on the stroke of two. Like Rosalind, two o'clock is your hour. Gosh! girl, don't you know who Rosalind was? No, she's quite safe — she's in a play by one Shakespeare. What do they teach you at your school? Sure, I'm serious — where the tapestries hang, Madame, and very fine ones.' He bent closer to the mouthpiece to say tenderly, 'Gosh! but I've missed you! No, I'm not kidding. So long, *adorada*.'

And he rang off, put the telephone down, sighed ecstatically, stretched mightily, and perceived Nina standing by the mediævally designed fireplace in which three or four great logs burned merrily.

To Nina, standing watching the leaping flames, the old term of endearment in his mouth and in his voice, so like his father's, gave her the oddest sensation. It was getting to be uncanny, this likeness to Esteban in all his ways and looks, though Ramon had never owned Esteban's remoteness of soul. Quite suddenly and unaccountably Nina found herself wishing she could see him again. Foolish, the feeling. And so far-fetched, when Esteban had been out of her life for twenty years. She would not let herself think of their last meeting in that funny little summer house on the bank of the Thames. She began to wonder if it was there still — surviving, as inanimate things do, so many generations of men.

As Ramon came forward to endow her with her usual good-morning embrace, she said softly: 'Ramon, you are quite grown up now. My little self-contained boy that used to be. And you are everything that there is of

American and modern, too, I believe. But tell me, darling, are you really in love' — she hesitated mischievously before she finished — 'this time?'

Again so like his father the almost stern, deep look he bent on her. 'Yes, Nina,' he returned simply, 'and one of these days I mean to marry this child.'

Nina, utterly nonplussed by the conclusive assertion and already plunged by it into a sea of doubt, continued to gaze into the fire for some minutes longer. She supposed she should have been prepared for just such a possibility, but now that it had materialized into a reasonable — or possibly unreasonable — prospect, she was uncertain what to say or do. Then she turned impulsively to Ramon.

'My dearest boy,' she cried, 'you know I wish for nothing but your happiness — but are you not rather young to think of marriage yet?'

Ramon smiled at her. 'From you, darling,' he returned, 'that's quite comic. I think I was born upon your twentieth birthday.'

Nina said hurriedly: 'That was entirely different. Though you know I've always been careful not to be the average worrying, rather jealous and unreasonable, mother — perhaps because once I suffered dreadfully from just such a domineering nature — yet I do beg of you not to rush into matrimony, especially in these days, without real thought. I should hate you to tie yourself up in a mad haste, and then have to smash your life up, and be paying alimony to your first mistake when you perhaps married a second time — some girl who would be the right companion to you.'

For a brief moment Ramon studied the pattern of the

carpet thoughtfully. Then he replied: 'Don't meet trouble before you need, Nina. As a matter of fact, we couldn't possibly get married for another two years, I suppose. Rosita is still in school. But we know our own minds.' He spoke quite certainly.

'So young?' asked Nina, but she could not help smiling.

After all, probably it was just a boy and girl affair — would never come to anything.

'And who is this little Rosita?' she asked.

The question brought Ramon over to her, and, slipping an arm about her, he led her to the roomy sofa, where he sat down beside her.

'Since,' he laughed, 'you caught us telephoning to each other — I'd better do some explaining, I think. But I always meant to tell you all about it — because this is serious, Nina.'

'But I don't want to rush you,' said she, relieved that the sound of wedding-bells was not so near at hand as she had at first feared. In these days mere children eloped and told their parents and guardians nothing till months afterward.

Suddenly she began to laugh — had not she and Esteban done exactly the same thing? Luckily, Ramon, considering how best to tell his tale, did not notice her laughter.

'Do you remember Manja talking yesterday about some girls' school at which she had been singing?'

'Yes.'

'And afterward I told you our machine came down ——'

'Ah,' nodded Nina, 'it was the same school. Some-

how I fancied it was — you looked a little guilty, Ramon, you know. And so you did do more than merely telephone and eat sandwiches there on the field of disaster?'

He said almost wistfully: 'I fell in love, Mother — at first sight, I think — with the most fascinating little thing. Wait till you see her — you'll love her, too. Rosita Fontana-Broughton ——'

Nina interrupted uneasily, 'Is she Spanish, then?'

Ramon nodded. 'Yes — on her mother's side. She was a sister of that heiress, Estella Diaz, who married the Duque de Ventura.'

'Oh,' said Nina.

'You know he lives in Washington now. He's some kind of important unofficial adviser to his own government.'

'I didn't know,' said Nina, her heart almost stopping with suspense. What was coming into her life? Uncertain what to say for the moment, she faltered into a constrained silence.

Ramon went on, unnoticing, luckily: 'Rosita was very fond of that aunt, it seems. But she died in a motor accident a couple of years ago.'

Estella Diaz dead — then Esteban was free. Nina was conscious of a great rush of emotion. Then she pulled herself together and told herself not to be foolish. The Duque de Ventura was as inaccessible as ever; had gone far beyond her reach many years before, she reflected somberly. But Ramon must never guess into what a turmoil of incertitude and perplexity he was, with every fresh word, plunging her. It was too contrary to realize that the boy had fallen in love with the

one girl he should never have even met. Appallingly embarrassing and distressing. She feared nothing but ill-luck could come of it.

Suddenly Nina remembered how she had discovered her old mascot, the golden horseshoe, the night before her birthday, when she had been for once energetically turning out a whole lot of rubbish she knew she should get rid of. Things, even in her nomadic life, accumulated so impossibly. And there in a pile of ancient presents, souvenirs, programmes, she had happened upon it. She hadn't thought of it for years. But even as she had replaced it in its rather battered box, she had wondered idly what new departure in her life would be the result of her handling of it. Yes, it had always brought her change. She remembered telling Pierre so the first time she had ever laid eyes upon him in the train between San Remo and Paris. It was Marseilles — yes, he had got on there, in the early dawn. And he had been quite afraid of Ramon ——

Sighing, Nina returned to the matter in hand. 'But, my dear,' she cried impulsively, 'do you imagine such a conservative and noble Spanish family will welcome the son of an opera-singer as a son-in-law?'

Ramon looked very surprised. 'Why not?' he demanded. 'Besides, I am going to marry Rosita — not her family. And, thanks to you and Pierre, I am not poor. Why, Nina, dear, with your fame behind me, I should think any girl might be proud to enter our family. Oh, yes, you must meet her, and very soon.'

Upon this remark there ensued silence. Nina hardly knew what to say.

'Yes,' Ramon continued blithely, 'we must certainly

effect a meeting. I think I shall bring her here, *Madre mia.*'

'But not to-day!' cried Nina quickly.

Ramon laid a hand on her arm. 'Are you nervous — oh, impossible.'

Then the second blow of the morning struck her hardly.

Said Ramon quite conversationally and in Esteban's own coaxing voice: 'Nina, I wish you'd tell me why you always called me — De Segovia? Surely I should have used the name of Chanel — Pierre being my father. Not that it makes a bit of difference to me. I'm equally proud of one as the other. Only when I get married I shall have to use my own name.'

Nina, suddenly pale and listless, faltered. 'Yes, I suppose so. But you said just now there was no hurry, darling. I mean about a wedding. And if she is still at school ——'

Ramon lifted his head. 'Certainly not,' he rejoined firmly. 'But I should like to go to Rosita's parents when they do get this side of the world again ——'

Nina noted with amused surprise that he was still European enough in his ideas to consider his future wife's parents as important, in spite of his Harvard years and his utterly modern reactions to life as lived to-day in the United States.

'I should like to meet them with a perfectly square outlook. I don't want to sail under false colors, however innocent.'

There she could not but applaud him. But, trying to postpone again an explanation on which she had feared for years to embark, Nina said slowly, 'Where are her parents? In Spain?'

'No — they live mostly on Long Island. They have a big estate there, and one in Florida. But at present they are traveling in Europe.'

Nina breathed again. The danger was not so imminent. A great desire to put off this evil day of apologia and disclosure, which like some sword of Damocles had been hanging over her head for so long, possessed her. At least till she had finished her winter season. This was March—in less than another four weeks they would both be on their way to the one home she had always clung to, her charming house near Fontainebleau. There, near the forest she adored, in its flower-filled garden, if she must tell Ramon the real truth about his birth, she would. He had promised faithfully to spend at least a couple of months with her there. She would keep him to that promise. After all, he did owe her something, let her be the most unexacting of mothers. All too soon, she could already perceive, he would be claimed by some other, younger woman. If not this absurd little schoolgirl — then another. And she would have to let him go. Mournfully, she reflected, she always seemed to be forced to give up the one being she loved best. It was no good getting too fond of any one. But now she must not let herself become overexcited, too greatly worried. She would find this parting could be borne like everything else, she supposed. But emotional bitterness and mental suffering of such a wretched kind was bad for her voice. She must remember that. And her voice was everything to her to-day. That alone had not disappointed her in all these years. To hear it float above the orchestra — that was always a refreshment of the soul. No, she would tell Ramon nothing at

the moment. That would be wisest. A stark fear of what he might feel about it all, when he came to know who he really was, invaded her. Perhaps he would blame her terribly — even come to hate her. And that, Nina knew, would break her heart.

She reached up impulsively and patted his cheek, so young and smooth and so dear. 'Listen, Ramon,' she murmured. 'I hate to remind you of it, especially when I have you so seldom all to myself, but — I ought to be practicing at this very moment. We must talk of all this again and later. Can you amuse yourself, darling, this morning? Round three o'clock, if you were free then, we might motor into the country somewhere and have dinner together, just you and I. What do you say to that?'

He bent and kissed her, then jumped up at once. 'Of course,' he returned penitently; 'what a selfish oaf I am, *Madre mia!* But' — and he began to laugh — 'Nina, dear, I hope you will understand and not be too hurt — I shall have to desert you this afternoon. Don't you remember when you came in I was arranging to meet Rosita at the Metropolitan Museum at two o'clock?'

'I wonder,' said Nina, 'why young lovers so often choose museums to do their wooing in.'

And very relieved that he was so occupied for that day, Nina made a face at him. For the time being he had forgotten that she had not answered his question. With a quick lift of her spirits, Nina hoped these young people might amuse themselves, be very happy, and in the end nothing definite come of it.

'So I have to stand down already for your Rosita,' she laughed. 'There — it is the way of young men. But do

you run along now and leave me to work in peace. You go and chatter to your *adorada* and give her the pendant you so nearly handed me. I'm sure she ought to love it.'

Completely mistress of herself again, she pushed him toward the door.

'*Allez* — I'm half an hour late as it is,' she cried. 'Send Miss McCann in to me at once. I've heaps of letters for her. We'll be independent of each other for to-day, Ramon. Have a good time.'

But though she determinedly pushed Ramon and his love affairs out of her mind all through the morning's routine, she was conscious of a new heavy burden of anxiety pressing ominously upon her. Oh, that Pierre with his gentle understanding of her life's story were still by her side. He would have known at once how best to meet this crisis. Now she must deal with it alone. Suddenly she felt very full of foreboding. If Ramon should insist on seeking out his father, what could she do? Very likely the boy would take some abysmally rash step now he was mixed up with this girl who was so nearly related to Esteban's duchess.

But not until late in the afternoon did she put on her fur coat and a bright red and very smart little hat and decide to go and see Salvatore. During the brief time in which her taxi took her to his hotel, she thought out what she should say to him. Salvatore was a very wise old man.

CHAPTER VIII

I

With Rosita's flamboyantly dramatic letter in his pocket, Esteban journeyed on the noon train a couple of days later from Washington to New York. He was accompanied on the trip by an openly disapproving Doña Juanita, who could find nothing but omens of the most disquieting nature in his determination to travel at that precise moment. The more because, while candidly admitting he found the expedition extremely inconvenient, not to say annoying, he yet was deaf to all his mother's objections to the apparently senseless pilgrimage. All on account of Rosita, it seemed, too. Too stupid! But it was in vain she pointed out that to cancel important political engagements so arbitrarily, because the spoilt child was having something like a *crise des nerfs* in the house of her grandmother, was little short of ridiculous. Esteban was unaccountably set on going himself to see what was the matter with the imp.

'And there really can be nothing very much the matter with her. She's perfectly healthy. Also it is not as if she were really your niece. That she is not too happy in New York just now is to be regretted — but why do you feel it necessary to worry about it?'

Esteban here was heard to remark that he happened to be fond of the baggage Rosita.

Doña Juanita shrugged her shoulders. 'But after all, the child is with her own relatives. Very soon her people will be home, too. Surely she could not expect to remain with us indefinitely?'

With Rosita's eloquent appeal in his pocketbook, Esteban found it difficult to phrase his next remark. Finally he said: 'She feels hurt that you should have sent her away so suddenly. Without any justification,' he added disingenuously.

Doña Juanita showed no signs of returning that lead. She merely flushed angrily.

'Of that surely I am the better judge,' she retorted. 'Besides, is it necessary for me to justify myself to a schoolgirl? At my age? I am astonished to hear you make such a suggestion!'

Perceiving that his mother intended to make no confidence at this stage in the game, Esteban said nothing, and Doña Juanita went on: 'I had excellent reasons for what I did. At present, in my opinion, Rosita is far better placed in the home of her grandmother. There, we have no responsibility should she get into mischief; and I have no talent for chaperoning these modern children — they take too much out of me. Moreover, here there are no young people of her own age for her to associate with. In Washington Square she has her cousin Lulu, at least.'

Esteban did not seem much struck with this view, and for quite five minutes he continued to regard the back of his mother's fashionably waved head, as she sat at her desk writing busily polite notes of concern about social engagements she must now abandon, with an odd look of amusement faintly tinged with embarrassment. Probably she had been completely in the right, though high-handed, yet his sympathies certainly lay with the rebel Rosita.

Finally he said slowly: 'I wish you had consulted me

before you banished her so peremptorily. Something might have been managed, surely. If it was only a question of young people. You know I'm fond of Rosita — and you have managed to make her believe, somehow, that I am angry with her, too. And I am not. I know no reason why I should be.'

Again Doña Juanita ignored the opening. But if he was a trifle mendacious at this point in the conversation, it was because his mother had moved her chair so that she could face him and her air was decidedly suspicious. She gave him a quick, alarmed look.

'But Rosita has no right to make mischief in that unwarrantable fashion,' she replied warmly. 'That shows a nasty, underhand disposition in her, I think.'

Esteban shook his head vigorously. 'No, no, *Madre mia*, you are on quite the wrong tack,' he protested. 'There could never be any question of that between us ——'

'I hope not.'

'But — I mean to go to New York.'

And no persuasions had any effect on this, to Doña Juanita, sinister determination. She was at last left a prey to a marked and foreboding melancholy which increased rather than relaxed in the following few hours.

That at the end of sixteen years she should find herself facing again almost the same problem was too much for any one to bear. Providence was not treating her fairly in this matter — when she had devoted her whole life to Esteban's career. Moved by her sense of the eternal injustice of existence, she once more sought out Esteban to urge that Rosita might even be the better for some discipline and a shade of neglect on his part.

But he only took refuge in a smiling silence which maddened her, and finally remarked genially that there was not the least necessity for her to sacrifice herself, or tear herself thus unceremoniously away from her friends and her social duties. He could travel perfectly — alone.

But this was just what Doña Juanita dared not allow. If a crash was to come, she must be there to ride the whirlwind and direct the storm. Even after all these years, she hated Nina de Segovia with an undying fury. Moreover, she was beginning to opine by this time that Esteban was not being completely truthful. Some important reason, which weighed with him, for this expedition he was withholding. No doubt of it — Rosita was a deceitful little wretch and would come to no good end. But she was in a position to do a lot of damage first, unfortunately. The whole thing would need the firmest handling. Unluckily to-day one literally did not know what young people were coming to. Lawless and defiant, they were not to be led or driven, she feared. Doña Juanita in her heart suspected she was up against a combination of youth and obstinacy which might in the end break her. Much would she have given for just one sight of that detestable epistle to Esteban which had set events so lamentably in motion, though the remarkably frank explanation of the situation which Rosita had made within its dozen pages of typed letter-press would have puzzled as well as angered her. It might have sent her equally with Esteban to the telephone, but Rosita would not have been the recipient of her call.

With him, however, the discovery that Rosita fancied

herself in love with a young man of whose very existence he now learned for the first time caused him to voice immediately an urgent warning to the effect that she must promise him not to take any rash steps before he had time to reach her.

'For goodness' sake, dear child, wait till I come,' he had begged.

'He is such a darling,' cooed the young voice over the wire. 'Uncle Esteban, he's going to be quite important some day.'

'Let that be as it may,' he urged, 'wait till I come.' And was only satisfied when she had definitely given the required assurance.

'Nothing till you come — cross my heart and hope to die. But then we're going to talk things over sensibly.'

Enjoying enormously the excitement of the moment, and fingering possessively the lovely pendant, received by her from Ramon most graciously in the new wing of the Metropolitan Museum, in a room filled with magnificent examples of early American furniture which neither of them even looked at, Rosita promised calm and circumspect behavior for the time which must elapse before her Uncle Esteban could reach her, and rang off.

Doña Juanita, overseeing the hasty packing of such belongings as she felt indispensable to his visit, could not help wondering just how the tiresome girl had managed to get her appeal through to Esteban. She had supposed all channels to be very efficiently stopped. Aghast at the possibilities in which it might involve them all, Doña Juanita further speculated mistrustfully on whether so far Esteban could have the slightest idea

that Rosita's tiresome young man happened to be his own son. Quite nefariously had she come by this piece of knowledge, having deliberately intercepted the letter in which Ramon had enclosed for Rosita's approval a couple of most excellent photographs of himself and his plane. Standing by it, helmeted and leather-jacketed, debonair and smiling, Doña Juanita had recognized him at once. This was Nina Hanana's boy — grown up. Not a doubt of it. This was the second Esteban — the baby that she had seen behind the screen at Covent Garden. Privately she marveled that Rosita had not already noticed the likeness between them. It could only be because his paths lay so removed from diplomatic circles that some outside eye had not already commented on the amazing resemblance between the Duque de Ventura and this unknown young aviator.

Studying the photographs through a strong magnifying glass, she was forced to admit Ramon de Segovia was a handsome fellow, with a careless, ingratiating air. She could not help conceding that Rosita had every right to be proud of having acquired so personable an admirer so young.

Picking up the document which had accompanied the photographs, she read it through measuringly again. The boy had written a charming letter; manly and straightforward, while full of those little tendernesses which women love. He talked, too, openly of marriage in a not too remote future, seemed already to possess an income, and was evidently anxious to make himself known to Rosita's parents as soon as opportunity offered. Well, there would be no opportunity, Doña Juanita reflected grimly, if she could help it. She hoped

she had taken care of that. If Rosita's mother, still all Spanish in spite of many years' residence in the New World, and markedly old-fashioned in her views, were guided by her, Ramon de Segovia would not enjoy a dog's chance of attaining his wishes; though for the moment in spite of her careful planning, her not too scrupulous maneuverings, Rosita had managed to steal a march on her.

'If one wishes to rule men, one must not mind playing for high stakes,' she reflected somberly.

And, seeing that her packing was finished, she dismissed her Catalonian maid abruptly.

Coldly displeased with Esteban's unexpected revolt, and his very irritating reticence as to his intentions with reference to Rosita's exasperating behavior plus the real object of his journey, which she surmised he had yet to confide to her, Doña Juanita sat facing her son in a Pullman car of the express as it began to move smoothly out of the Union Station, gaining velocity with every moment.

Finally, when they had been running easily for some twenty minutes, she could not help remarking impatiently: 'What really made you decide to travel to New York this week? I can hardly believe that it was Rosita alone. For her next week would have done just as well, surely?'

But even as she heard herself asking the tactless question, a sudden look in Esteban's face told her something vital had happened and no longer would she be able to control his life. Some instinct warned her that she was at the end of a chapter.

Esteban glanced up from the magazine he had begun

to read. 'No, I think not,' he returned indifferently. 'What I have in mind to do could not be done next week. Circumstances might have changed too much. Besides, I have, as a matter of fact, to speak at a public dinner of some kind at the Waldorf Astoria. On Thursday, I think. Except that I hope you will manage to amuse yourself at the house of these relatives of Estella's, you really need not have put yourself out to come with me this time, as I told you before, if you felt it a nuisance, *Madre mia*.'

Sensible of the slight frigidity of his manner, Doña Juanita hastened to remark rather lamely that travel, no matter where, never had been any trouble to her, but she still feared Esteban might be sacrificing something of real moment in Washington. She hoped he would forgive the reiterations of an old woman, she added somewhat tartly.

He repeated after her thoughtfully: 'Something of real moment.' Then he added after quite a long pause, 'Even that would not matter, now ——'

'Why not?'

'Because I intend to return to Spain soon.'

'Return to Spain? Why?' Here was calamity at the door. Doña Juanita's voice was full of an anxious alarm.

Esteban allowed his glance to stray out of the window at the hurrying landscape as it slid by the windows of the long coach. 'Ronda,' he said slowly, 'would be so beautiful now. And to-day one might enjoy it.'

Doña Juanita breathed again. If that were all! 'We can easily visit Ronda during your next leave of absence. But this is rather a sudden fancy, isn't it? In

dear Estella's lifetime she could never get you to go near the place. I hope it was not because I lived there so much.'

Esteban laughed. 'No,' he said. 'As a matter of fact, a little while back I came across some acrobats — the Lopez twins — I knew there once, long ago. They reminded me of old times ——'

'But you don't mean to imply you wish to return to Ronda for any length of time — just because you saw some acrobats perform in a theater, recently?'

'Why not? As I sat watching them, I realized I had never done anything I wanted for years — and I begin to long for my own country sometimes, don't you?'

Doña Juanita, however, could not truthfully say that she felt any great urge toward Spain. But unfortunately the Pullman car of an express speeding toward New York City was no place in which to argue the matter. Therefore, after giving utterance to a heavy sigh or two and a muttered 'But, dearest Esteban, you must be taking leave of your senses,' she let the unpleasing subject drop heavily to the ground. Later, of course, she must find out what he meant by all this nonsense. Acrobats, reminding him of days long past! Indeed, she did not like the sound of that at all. From the circus to Nina might not be a far cry. And, *Dios!* that was not to be contemplated. But, calming herself deliberately, Doña Juanita decided Esteban could not be seriously intending to retire from the diplomatic service of his country. She had taken alarm, no doubt, far too soon. Only the very idea appalled her. He was far too young to stand down. He should have at least another fifteen years of interesting, important work before him. He

could never be so insane as to throw away the fruits of his sixteen years of service when she knew he was on the point of being offered the Paris Embassy. That one post she had always coveted for him. In attaining that eminence, she felt, the end would indeed justify the means and crown her work. Afterward he could do what he pleased, she would not care. She would be ready to sing her *Nunc dimittis*. After all, she was not so young as she had been, or so full of driving ambition. That Estella had had no child had been an abiding grief to her — Esteban's son would never own those vast estates, after all. But Esteban must not dream of retirement now.

'That must never be,' thought Doña Juanita.

More than once during the journey she stole furtive, perplexed looks at him as the train continued to rush mightily toward the much more wintry Northern landscape. By the time they were running into the Broad Street Station at Philadelphia, she was caught up in a mass of speculative uncertainties and apprehensions. Since Estella's lamented death, Doña Juanita had more than once been conscious of a new, rather strange mood in Esteban; almost as though he had emerged from a prison-house of some kind; though the idea was absurd, of course.

Hurriedly she added, 'A mental prison-house,' without the least sense of humor.

The hours and the landscape changed again, flashed by, and they were coming to a final stop in the immense echoing halls of the Pennsylvania terminal. At last they were driving amongst the bright lights and nondescript traffic of lower Fifth Avenue in the Fontana-Broughtons' handsome car.

They were crossing Madison Square when Esteban said with almost too elaborate carelessness: 'By the way, I intend to hear Carmen at the Metropolitan this week. Do you care to come, too, *Madre mia?*'

Cold shivers ran up and down Doña Juanita's spine. Could this be the real object of his coming to New York? Was he piecing the puzzle together for her?

'But, my dear Esteban,' she cried, 'do you think it wise?' The words were out before she could stop them.

He turned and looked at her with that odd, enigmatic expression which she disliked so and which she had noticed too often on his handsome face in the last week.

'But — why not?' he demanded.

Doña Juanita, faced with so much unconcern, hardly felt equal to murmuring: 'But — the De Segovia is singing.'

Esteban nodded. He even looked openly mirthful. 'Is there any law against my hearing her?' he inquired.

'But will it not wake up memories that had better continue to slumber?' Doña Juanita affected a discreetly sympathetic air.

Esteban did not seem to think so. 'Nonsense! I was a boy when I was in love with her,' he said candidly. 'Years and years ago. And I'm afraid I treated her very badly, or she wouldn't have revenged herself on me as she did. But surely that I was crazy about her ages ago need not prevent me from hearing one of the greatest artists of the day sing her most celebrated rôle. I am not made of sugar. I can stand the ordeal, *Madre mia.* Besides,' he finished as the car turned into the picturesque and crowded spaces of Washington Square, 'I want to judge for myself what she is like to-day — the

Lopez twins still adore her. You know I have never heard her sing since that first season of hers in England ——'

This was news to Doña Juanita. 'You actually heard her sing Carmen in that summer before the war?'

As the motor stopped he said: 'Certainly — the night I was to have married her. Only she had changed her mind. She was a dream of loveliness then. And Pierre Chanel was a lucky dog. But he deserved her more than I did. I'm glad that once I had the opportunity of a chat with him.'

Feeling rather as if the earth had yawned open at her feet and she was looking into an unfathomable abyss, Doña Juanita erectly entered the house of Rosita's grandmother.

2

Esteban said: 'I suppose you have no photograph of this demigod of yours, *preciosa?*'

Rosita gave him a quick look under her eyelashes and shook her head. She was standing by his chair in the library at the back of the house after breakfast the morning after his arrival. This was the first moment she had had alone with him and explanations could not be put off any longer.

'No,' she returned slowly. 'You see he did send me a letter with two photographs in it, just before' — she hesitated — 'Aunt Juanita sent me away — but something happened and I never got them.'

'Pity,' said Esteban. 'One can judge a good deal from a photograph. Well, I must see this young man, then.'

Again Rosita shook her head. 'You can't — for a few days. He went away yesterday.'

Esteban laughed. 'Did he know I was arriving?'

'No — besides, he's not that kind.'

'Wouldn't run away from me, you mean?'

'You are mistaken — when you make fun of him.'

Perceiving banter of any kind to be decidedly out of place, Esteban laughed at his niece's young seriousness, pinched her cheek, and said: 'Well, at any rate, continue to be sensible for a short time longer and hold your tongue. What is not discussed before Aunt Juanita and your grandmother cannot be held against you, later. You have an uphill road to climb — but I was in love myself once, long ago.'

'Not with Aunt Estella?'

Esteban shook his head. 'Your aunt was a dear soul — I was very fond of her ——'

'But this was some one else?'

'Yes — that's why I'm sympathetic with you to-day, probably. But just get this, Rosita — nobody is going exactly to hurrah you on to this marriage — if it ever comes to that.'

'Oh, it will,' Rosita was tranquilly certain. 'Wait till you've seen him, Uncle Esteban.'

'Apparently I'm not to set eyes on him till the end of the week. And it does appear to me a pity you won't trust me so far as to impart to me his name. All kinds of boys take to flying to-day, but they are not all Lindberghs. I assure you I have no intention of betraying your confidence.'

Rosita wriggled uncomfortably. 'I'd like to — but suppose you were — once you heard his name — to hate

the idea of me having anything more to do with him, where should I be then? We'd have to elope. No — when you've seen and talked with him, it will be all different. You'll be as keen on him as I am.'

Esteban, contemplating the kind of upheaval so soon to be caused by Rosita's plans, doubted this. Of course she had no right to consider this young man seriously — at her age it was ridiculous — and yet he could discern no better way of preventing a scandal, sooner or later, than by seizing the first opportunity of talking, like a father, to her romantic flying man and definitely arraying himself on her side now. If nobody else was, he was aware of the vital necessity for retaining all her confidence and trust at this moment. Scolding her would do no kind of good. Besides, when it came right down to it, Rosita would have to live her own life. One could only suggest, advise — and hope for some common-sense: probably the last quality it would occur to these young people to use in this crisis.

With an amused laugh, he said: 'I suppose you consider this Galahad to possess the eloquence of a Demosthenes plus the charm and ability of an Admirable Crichton?'

Rosita opened her eyes widely. 'Who are they?' she demanded artlessly.

'Very important and persuasive people in their day and age,' he returned.

'That's him all over,' she replied with prompt enthusiasm. 'He could do anything he wanted to. His tail-spins are lovely. He's just the smartest guy!'

Not doubting his capacity for freezing on to a good prospect, Esteban let her go for that time, but decided

to keep a discreet eye on her movements about the date of the 'smart guy's' return. If only she had spilt the beans as far as his name and place of residence were concerned, then Esteban might have set circumspect inquiries in motion. But, confronted with a blank refusal to supply him with the definite information he had tried to extract from her, he could only wait on events.

'After all, delay harms few plans,' he reflected. 'And I should be equal to coping with this pair of children. But I don't want to make Rosita unhappy, if I can help it.'

He was, however, surprised to find his niece excusing herself with eloquent volubility from accompanying him to the Metropolitan Opera House on the Friday evening. It seemed she had a most important date with Lulu, and a half-dozen other young folk, to a dinner and theater that evening.

'Grand'mère knows all about it.'

'And "Show Boat," I suppose, is more in your line,' Esteban conceded. 'Very well, I must be the loser — of your company.'

But, knowing how recently she would have incontinently flung over all her young friends and any invitation to go out with him, he realized in her present apologetic but firm attitude that she had quite suddenly grown up. Rosita, dear and delightful, was no longer the thoughtless, happy-go-lucky schoolgirl of even three months back. She had developed an unexpected strength of character.

'Her young man, I suppose. Children grow up so quickly to-day.'

He said as much to old Mrs. Fontana-Broughton as

they drove to the opera house up Broadway toward eight o'clock on the Friday. It was a lovely evening, mild and serene; and about the tops of the high buildings a blue mist hovered faintly.

Rosita's grandmother returned rather testily: 'These babies think they are women before they get rid of their milk teeth. It's all absurd. What with their lipsticks, and their latchkeys, and living their own lives, and their beaux, one is constantly on the jump. And then they talk about being frustrated and inhibited, and such nonsense.'

Doña Juanita, wrapped in gloom and sables, endorsed the old lady's energetic strictures. 'Half the time I don't understand what this new jargon means. It seems so entirely theoretic — and to belong far more to the professor's work-table; to be of so utterly an experimental nature like the Einstein theory. But they seem to place the greatest reliance on their weird shibboleths, looking on them as trustfully as if they were a kind of mental life buoy.'

Once inside the opera house, however, she had other matters to worry about, having made up her mind that Esteban was not treating her fairly about his reasons for coming to New York.

Because the famous De Segovia was singing Carmen to a crowded house, and, perhaps, because Bizet's masterpiece was seldom given, Doña Juanita, from their box in the horseshoe, recognized many friends she imagined she had left behind her in Washington. So, it seemed, they were not the only pilgrims to undertake the journey to hear one of the finest singers of the day in her greatest rôle.

Nodding and smiling to this one and that, she hid the anxiety which had been her torment ever since she had heard Esteban say that once he had been on the point of marrying De Segovia. That her machinations at the time had frightened Nina into marrying another man hardly seemed a source of satisfaction now. Supposing Esteban ever found out what she had done, all those years ago?

'Quite a few of our Washington friends here to-night,' she murmured to him as he took a seat immediately behind her.

'Aren't you glad you came?' he asked mischievously.

Doña Juanita, greeting other friends as the box filled up and the overture started, was evasive. 'I always like to listen to good music well sung.'

'And that leaves me as it finds me,' teased Esteban.

But if Doña Juanita was sternly concealing her restless unease, so too was Nina, who had spent the intervening days since her birthday in a state of the most persistent indecision and turmoil — a condition of mind which had not done her temper any good. So that Miss McCann, her indefatigable secretary, had wondered just what bad news the *diva* could have received without her being cognizant of it. But the advice with which Salvatore had endowed Nina on the afternoon on which she had sought him out to lay her problem before him had proved too unpalatable to take.

'Tell the boy the truth,' he had advised at once. 'Some day it is bound to come out, and perhaps at a time when it will be far more painful for you all.'

'But to give Ramon such a shock!'

'He must know some day — since he has already begun to ask inconvenient questions. The longer you put it off, the worse it will be. He certainly has the right to know the truth about himself.'

'I know — you're quite right,' she returned, sighing. 'I suppose I'm a coward—but if you knew how I dread telling him.'

'Ramon's strong enough to stand it. That boy has his head very well placed on his shoulders. He'd end at the top of any tree he started to climb.'

'Suppose he should hate me because of it?' Nina suggested pensively.

Salvatore, reflectively stroking his beard, considered that Ramon might be a good deal upset, but would never hate Nina.

'You mark my words, he'll take it far more easily than you think.'

'I wish I could believe you. But Ramon says least when he feels most.'

'Anyway,' finished Salvatore, 'if you feel so nervous about it, I should do nothing till your season is over. That will be in a very short time now.'

Relieved at this respite, Nina was still more thankful to learn the next day that Ramon was suddenly called away on aviation business which must not be postponed.

'Though I shall do my best to come and hear you sing Carmen, *Madre mia*. Mind you sing specially well for me.'

And he departed to make his train with a bare two minutes to spare. But a miss is always as good as a mile and this time he was on board.

Now Nina sat in her dressing-room, ready for her first entrance. Already she could hear the start of the military march of fifes and trumpets which announced the entrance of Don José and the relief guards on the scene. Before her on the narrow dressing-table, in amongst the glass trays, bottles, powder jars, and cream littered on the white linen cloth, lay a letter she had received much earlier in the day.

'Dearest Nina,' it said, 'Rosita and I will be listening to you together. She will give her friends the slip after dinner to be with me and hear you. She was to have gone to "Show Boat." After the opera is over, I am bringing her home to supper. She is very anxious to meet you. So order a good spread, for we shall all be as hungry as hunters; and don't bring any other guests back with you to-night, darling. I want you and Rosita all to myself. You will love her — though, like me, she is not in the least musical.' The note was signed — Ramon.

By this time the street boys' chorus was ending as the relieved guard marched away followed by the usual crowd of loungers. How often had Nina heard it all before, but never with this sick sense of apprehension!

Emilia, appearing from some obscure corner of the room in which she had been working, now said: 'Isn't it time Madame went on the stage?'

Nina started. Lost in thought, she had not noticed how near the moment had come to her entrance.

'*Allons!*' she said, and fled to the high, narrow platform in the wings from whence she would run out onto the bridge and thence to the busy square below.

As the cigar girls sang their chorus:

'Dans l'air, nous suivons des yeux
La fumée
Qui vers les cieux
Monte, monte parfumée.
Dans l'air nous suivons des yeux
La fumée,
La fumée ——'

Nina turned to Emilia standing beside her, ready to give any last-minute touch needed.

'How do I look to-night?' she asked.

Emilia threw back her head and laughed. 'Madame is more beautiful than usual,' she said. 'There is a something about her to-night ——'

'Nous ne voyons pas la Carmencita.'

insistently sang the soldiers to the girls in the square below.

With a laugh and a wave of her hand, Nina was gone.

His glances steadily leveled on that entrance in which from past experience he knew Nina must make her first appearance of the evening, Esteban caught at last the gay salute, saw her laugh at some unseen person in the wings, and run lightly across the bridge. Then he was aware that his heart was beating quicker than usual.

'She is more beautiful than ever,' he thought, as Emilia had done, watching her progress through the crowded scene. Already about her the young men surged.

'Carmen, sur tes pas, nous nous pressons tous';

'How true that is,' thought Esteban.

'Carmen, sois gentille, au moins réponds nous
Et dis-nous quel jour tu nous aimeras.'

Coquette to the tips of her fingers, lithe, feline, fascinating, irresponsible, she flirted with them all, her dark eyes already on José working at his ridiculous little chain.

A moment more — and she had begun to sing.

'*Dios!* the Song-Bird!' murmured Esteban.

> 'Quand je vous aimerai, ma foi, je ne sais pas.
> Peut-être jamais, peut-être demain;
> Mais pas aujourd'hui, c'est certain.'

Then the house settled itself to listen to the *Habanera* perfectly rendered.

Salvatore, in that inconspicuous box near the stage wherein he had ensconced himself with Manja, allowed his thoughts to travel back into the past. To that afternoon in May when, standing outside her door, he had for the first time heard Nina sing the famous aria which to-day was so bound up with her fame. How many times had he heard her sing it since that day! Now he had been her manager for sixteen successful years and with any luck she should easily keep her place in the sun for another dozen at least. Perhaps some spontaneity, some actual girlish charm she had lost, but the voice was still the Song-Bird's; and as an artist she was incomparable — at the height of her powers.

Esteban, listening, felt like a reed shaken by the wind. Years ago his had been the adoration of a foolish boy — to-day he was suffering the love of a man. 'Nina — Nina!' But she was too occupied with the business of the scene to hear his passionate heart calling to her.

Envying Don José from the bottom of his soul, he saw Nina go up to the dragoon and force him to speak

to her; watched her throw the fatal flower at him, which started all the mischief, and run into the factory.

Sighing, Esteban leaned back in his chair and gave but a perfunctory attention to the following scene between the soldier and Micaela, as usual got up in virginal blue and adorned with long, fair braids. He was far away from the present moment and dreaming of lost and forgotten days spent with Nina when, simultaneously with the riot in the factory, Doña Juanita made a most marvelous discovery.

'Look, Esteban,' she said in a low, tense whisper; 'look over there — the other side of the house — in the omnibus box.'

Esteban did as requested.

'Surely that is Rosita sitting in the front row. But don't say a word to her grandmother ——'

Following as well as he was able the direction of her agitated glance, Esteban had to admit she was right. Two seats which, at the rise of the curtain, had been empty were now filled; and in one of them certainly sat Rosita in a shell-pink frock, wearing an unusually pretty necklace of coral and pearls. In her ears there dangled long drops of pale pink coral.

'Where did she get those?' muttered Doña Juanita. '*Dios!* the child has gotten herself up as though for a coming-out party.'

'Who is the young man?' asked Esteban cautiously, after a cursory survey of her escort.

'How should I know?' snapped his mother.

'I thought she was going to see a musical comedy with Lulu and her pals.'

'So did we all.'

'But, she is playing hooky — there's a deceitful minx for you,' said Esteban.

'And something must be done about it,' returned Doña Juanita firmly.

The agitation and hubbub on the stage having subsided temporarily, Carmen made her second entrance, preceded by Don José and followed by the two dragoons sent to arrest her, and once more Esteban forgot everything in watching her. Rosita and her mutinous escapade dwindled to an extreme unimportance. He wasn't sure that he didn't envy the child sitting there, hearing Nina for the first time, with her hand in her lover's. For that must be he, of course, the young man. Well, let Rosita be happy while she could.

Across the other side of the house, Ramon was whispering to her, 'How do you like my mother?' And Rosita was returning warmly, 'I think she's swell.'

The fall of the curtain found Esteban's place empty. When Doña Juanita turned to speak to him, she found he had slipped noiselessly away. But as during the intermission the box was crowded with people, in the general chatter and excitement Doña Juanita was unable to watch the omnibus box closely enough to see if he had gone in search of Rosita. Almost she hoped he had not. But Esteban's errand, whatever it was, took him nowhere near his niece. Indeed, he had for the time being forgotten all about her. The warning bell sounded all over the house, the lights went down in the auditorium, and Esteban hurried back to his seat as the curtain was rising on the second act and the tavern of Lillas Pastia.

Acutely conscious of his trance-like preoccupation

with Carmen, Doña Juanita sideways covertly watched him almost as much as the stage below. There was no doubt of it, Esteban was feeling it all too much.

In the distance José was singing the Dragoon of Alcalá.

'I wonder — I wonder,' thought Esteban. 'Does she know yet I am watching her?'

Throughout the love scene between Carmen and her ill-fated adorer, Doña Juanita gave her attention to her son.

'He is in love with her still,' she thought alarmedly. And sat in a mounting cold misery till the curtain fell on the final chorus:

> 'Le ciel ouvert! la vie errante,
> Pour pays l'univers, pour loi sa volonté,
> Et surtout la chose enivrante,
> La liberté! la liberté!'

The applause after the descent of the curtain at last died down and Doña Juanita turned to Esteban: 'Pity Carmen was such a faithless creature,' she said. 'Madame de Segovia certainly portrays the erring gypsy finely. She is past question one woman in the right place.'

An influx of acquaintance surging about them, Esteban did not reply. But the talk began to flow about the Song-Bird and her affairs.

A girl in green-and-gold at Doña Juanita's elbow, who was occupying her leisure moments with a tiny lipstick, retouching a cupid's bow already defined enough, drawled: 'I wish I could afford her dressmaker. But then the woman has such a magnificent figure.'

Said old Mrs. Fontana-Broughton interestedly: 'Does she dress well off the stage, Sylvia?'

'I should say so! But it must be a great asset not looking as most prima donnas do, as though she'd swallowed the grand piano by mistake, and it had stuck halfway down.'

There was a general laugh at this witticism, and some one else remarked: 'I'd like to be able to live where she does.'

'And where is that?' asked Esteban.

At once the exact position of the building in which Nina resided was given him, as also a detailed description of her apparently glamorous studio apartment. It transpired that at least two of those present had enjoyed her hospitality.

'What kind of a hostess does she make?' asked Mrs. Fontana-Broughton.

A consensus of opinion decided she was delightful.

At last the curtain went up on the third act. In their box Salvatore and Manja watched Nina as they had done many a time before. 'She is singing better than ever,' said Manja. 'With what verve and abandon! She might be singing for some one she thought a whole lot of.'

'Ramon is somewhere in the house. She told me so just now,' said Salvatore.

'But will you tell me,' pursued Manja, 'what makes her wear a red rose in her hair to-night, and why no hat? How could she come by a rose in this rocky and hidden abode of the smugglers? I thought Nina was a more accurate artist than to make such a silly mistake as that.'

Salvatore chuckled. 'If it were not our dear Nina, who lately seems to be weary of most things except her art, I should say it was a signal to some one in the audience. But that it could not be — now.'

Said Manja, 'I have known her to signal to Pierre, while he was conducting, as to the precise restaurant to which she wished him to take her after the performance for supper.'

Salvatore sighed. 'Once she was always up to monkey tricks. They used to annoy me then, but now I'd give a good deal to see her up to one of them again. A thousand pities *ce cher brave garçon* Pierre is gone. He understood her — he was a man in a thousand.'

Nina on the stage was singing to José:

> 'Notre métier, vois tu, ne te vaut rien.
> Et tu ferais fort bien de partir au plus vite.'

Salvatore, his attention only half on her, went on: 'I wish he were here now, our Pierre, for, if I don't miss my guess, Nina is going to have a hard time explaining to Ramon that he is the son — and probably the only child — of so well-known a man as the Duque de Ventura.'

Manja shrugged her shoulders. 'Why need he know? Pierre was always his real father. No man could have shown a more generous spirit, or done more for him.'

To this Salvatore did not reply at once, but when José was singing his final impassioned 'I go — but I shall come again,' to a Carmen aloof and indifferent, he said slowly, 'It seems the boy is in love.'

'At his age that is only to be expected.'

'Yes — but he got it into his head that there was

some reason why he could not go by Pierre's name. In Heaven's name, why didn't we think of a little thing like that years ago? Just one of those slips that are so full of fate, I suppose.'

The curtain went up on the last act. A square in Seville. At the back of the stage the walls of the old arena, the entrance to the circus shut off by a high curtain. In the foreground a scene of continually shifting animation, as the stage directions prescribe.

'This act is short,' said Manja. 'Really Carmen has very little to do. But I always find Nina's death so touching. It was clever of you, Salvatore, to teach her to do it just that way. There never is a dry eye in the house.'

But when Carmen appeared with the Toreador, Manja noticed she was still wearing a red rose.

'Far more suitable now,' said the elder prima donna. 'She's got it very trickily arranged in her mantilla, too.'

However, Salvatore had his mind on less frivolous affairs. 'I think I shall suggest a European tour for her soon. Ramon can look after himself. Nina has had enough sorrow in her life — I should like to spare her the inevitable worries that will be sure to crop up when Ramon decides to marry. Probably he may fall a victim to some girl who will thoroughly disapprove of Nina. I have seen such things happen before this.'

Manja, beating time mechanically to the chorus which preceded Escamillo's departure into the arena and glory, looked about her for her brocade wrap during Carmen's spirited scene of defiance with Don José.

'I wish,' she said as she dragged it on, 'Nina did not feel things so deeply. I never believed she quite got

over that early love-affair of hers. And I know Pierre didn't. He was worried about it at times.'

Salvatore said: 'Does one ever forget one's first love, I wonder?'

José on the stage above them was exclaiming:

'Pour la dernière fois, démon,
Veux-tu me suivre?'

'Really that man is very convincing,' said Manja carelessly.

Salvatore reached for his cloak.

Nina sang defiantly:

'Non! non!
Cette bague autrefois tu me l'avais donnée,
Tiens.'

'That always upsets the apple-cart,' said Salvatore. 'I wonder why women love throwing rings at quondam lovers? It is a much more widely prevalent custom, I find, than I had an idea of.'

Said Manja in her deep voice: 'I never threw mine. I made a collection of them. I have them all to this day.'

On the stage José had just stabbed Carmen.

'That'll show her,' said Manja, chuckling, 'how dangerous it is to throw jewelry about.'

But the short death scene drew tears and then thunderous applause as it always did. The curtain fell on Don José's last despairing cry:

'O ma Carmen! ma Carmen adorée!'

It was Salvatore this time who observed with a rising curiosity that Nina was holding a red rose in her fingers when she came before the golden curtain to curtsy to the

applause of a typical metropolitan and fashionable audience.

3

Doña Juanita returned to Washington Square with Rosita's grandmother as soon as they could locate the car in the mass of traffic and the jostling crowds, which moved in every direction about the opera house. Esteban, as soon as he had seen them into it, excused himself.

'I think I shall go to the club,' he said; but as soon as they were off he began to stroll slowly up Broadway.

As always in that amazing thoroughfare, the thousand and one winking, bright lights advertising theatrical and movie hits and industrial attainments equally blandly looked humorously on the nightly pageant displayed up and down this challenging district.

Still at their almost bovine pace, the strolling crowds on the pavements — often overflowing into the street — passed to and fro, endlessly gazing equally incuriously at smashing hits in lights above the theater entrances or at their fellow strollers. Here and there from some doubtful-looking slip of a store the raucous voice of an auctioneer, rising momentarily high above the din, sold to a gaping crowd objects of curiously rococo art and distinctly doubtful vertu. The thunder of the traffic ceased only in obedience to the brawny and extended arms of traffic cops and traffic lights, green and red. Yet these united were not completely sufficient to debar intrepid pedestrians from engaging in a hurdle race with death across the side streets on their way to supper, Subway, or Elevated train. New-Yorkers cannot be kept waiting more than three minutes — if that. Above

everything a light mist rendered the tops of the high buildings ethereal and indistinct as castles in the air. Even the Paramount clock looked insubstantial.

But Nina, to whom the whole fascinating and magical scene, at once so human and so bizarre, had become as familiar as her daily grapefruit for breakfast, did not look out of the windows of her discreet and inconspicuous car as she drove back to her apartment. She was wondering just what she must say to this child Rosita whom Ramon never should have dared to bring to supper.

'What would her people say if they knew?'

That was almost the first question she asked Ramon when she reached home and found them waiting for her, sitting cozily by the fire in her music-room. Rosita, who had jumped to her feet as Ramon went toward his mother, had the grace to appear a trifle confused and guilty. But Ramon was quite business-like and cool about it all.

'It's all O.K. — I am to take her to the house where her cousin Lulu will be, in an hour, and Rosita will go back to Washington Square with her.'

'You are sure nobody will be annoyed over her coming to see me?'

'How could they be?' he demanded. 'Sometimes you can be quite silly, Nina, darling.'

And Rosita sighed, 'I did so want to meet you,' in a very small and engagingly childish voice.

After that there was nothing for Nina to do but welcome the scapegraces, and graciously, no matter how dubious she felt about the escapade; the whole affair being terribly complicated for her by Rosita being the

niece of Esteban's wife. But it was clearly impossible to maintain an appearance of displeasure when she was really so pleased to have an opportunity of seeing them both together, and while they were explaining eloquently how much they had counted on this moment.

'You see there might not have been another chance for ages.' Thus Ramon judicially. 'Rosita goes back to school quite soon.'

'Though I shall find school terribly dull,' said Rosita, 'now.'

Nina flung herself into an armchair and held out her hands to them both.

'So you are little Rosita,' she said, and drew Ramon's Dresden china goddess toward her. 'And I suppose you have both decided you cannot live without each other.'

Rosita nodded. She was, in spite of her supposed sophistication and poise, inclined to be distinctly impressed, faced with so much genuine celebrity and real knowledge of men and things. Privately she was inclined already to consider Ramon's mother as the most beautiful person in the world, probably. She had never come across any one so fascinating, certainly, before. Shyly she therefore allowed herself to be drawn within the circle of Nina's arm and perched on the side of her chair.

Ramon, lounging on the other side with an arm affectionately flung around Nina, said: 'We've heaps to talk to you about.'

'Go on, then,' she encouraged them with an amused laugh; 'spill all the beans, children. You will find me a very safe repository for your confidences.'

It was not long, therefore, before she was in possession of the latest news from the front; could judge exactly how far Esteban was sympathetic.

'You see, I happen to know he was in love himself, once,' said Rosita.

And estimate how unconquerably inimical Doña Juanita was.

'How she found us out in the first place, I never could tell,' ended Rosita.

There followed then from Ramon a detailed sketch of what he intended to do to win consent from Rosita's parents to their being engaged.

'We are quite ready to wait two years.'

Fortunately neither of them noticed how silent Nina had become.

Suddenly Rosita jumped to her feet and wrung her hands: 'Gosh!' she cried; 'I never said even once how I loved you as Carmen. Isn't that the limit? But I did — I think you were just beautiful.'

She looked so ingenuous and youthful, standing there, that Nina could not help laughing. She began to understand how Ramon had been attracted to this engaging little creature. And it was on a very pleasant note of understanding that the three of them sauntered into the dining-room a moment or so later to eat supper.

They had nearly finished the light-hearted repast and Ramon had just announced regretfully that he supposed he'd have to take Rosita back to her cousin Lulu in another ten minutes when they heard the outer doorbell ring loudly — and keep on ringing; some one evidently preferring to glue a finger to the button till the door should open.

'What's that?' asked Ramon. 'You didn't expect any one at this hour, did you, Nina?'

She shook her head.

'Suppose,' suggested Rosita blandly, 'it's Aunt Juanita?'

'Even so, don't be too alarmed,' said Nina. 'I dare say we can smuggle you out of the place without her knowing.'

The entrance of Waterman, Nina's treasured butler and general factotum, found them all apprehensively curious to know who the visitor could be.

'Who is it?' asked Ramon at once.

'A gentleman, to see Madam.' Waterman turned to Nina. 'I was to say the Duque de Ventura; and he begs you will be good enough to spare him a few moments, ma'am. The matter is urgent or he would not have dreamt of disturbing you at this time of night.'

'Night and day are all the same to me,' murmured Nina.

Rosita looked blanker than ever. 'It's my Uncle Esteban,' she breathed. 'Gosh!'

'Yes,' said Ramon; 'we're in the open sea, now, and it looks like a rough voyage.'

With a sidelong glance at the magnificent red roses with which Waterman had earlier decorated the supper-table, Nina turned to him. But before she could say anything, Ramon had asked rapidly in Spanish: 'What are you going to do?'

Nina looked surprised. 'Going to see him, of course.'

'Should I not come, too?'

But she shook her head decidedly. 'Tell the Duke I will be with him at once, Waterman,' she said.

And, treading lightly, that faithful servitor of hers left the room.

'Well,' said Ramon, 'I suppose we're in for it.'

'Not necessarily,' murmured Nina; then added quite inconsequently: 'I don't know what I should do without Waterman. He lends such an air of stout respectability to our establishment.'

'You are sure you wouldn't like me to see Rosita's uncle?' again demanded Ramon.

'Certainly not,' she returned, with a firmness which surprised him. 'I'll do all the talking that has to be done.'

'How could he guess I was here?' wailed Rosita, very close to tears.

But Nina, looking amazingly mirthful, caught and kissed the mournful nymph.

'Perhaps he hasn't the least notion you are here, *preciosa*,' she returned. 'Listen, Ramon; you wait in here with the child for exactly ten minutes after I'm gone — then be off with you as swiftly and silently as possible. You can slip out of the apartment without a soul being the wiser.'

She patted them each encouragingly, leaned between them to possess herself of two of the finest roses the bowl in the center of the supper-table contained, and, with these held lightly in two fingers, went quickly out of the room. At the door she turned to wave them an airy salute.

'A little patience,' she said, 'and everything will come right.'

In the studio she found Esteban sitting at the writing-table staring at a picture of his son.

'He's grown into a handsome fellow, hasn't he?' she said, coming up behind him and regarding the photograph over his shoulder.

Esteban swung round. 'You've robbed me of him too long, Nina,' he returned, and held out both his hands.

Nina put hers in them.

'Don't get up,' she said, and sat on the arm of his chair. 'Why didn't you look me up long ago?'

'I didn't know just how welcome I should be,' he replied. 'But when I heard you sing Carmen to-night, and you wore my roses ——'

'And lovely they are, too,' said Nina. 'They were charming messengers — only I didn't expect to see you till to-morrow.'

'I couldn't wait,' said Esteban. 'The idea that I had half a chance with you nearly drove me distracted. I was so afraid you might change your mind.'

'I don't believe I have any mind to-day,' said Nina, and, getting up from the chair, she went over to the fireplace. After a moment she sat down on the sofa before it.

'Come — and sit here,' she bade Esteban.

Obediently he walked over to her.

'You know I guessed at once what you'd come for,' said Nina.

'I can't believe that.'

'Ramon ——' said she.

'Well, partly,' he admitted. 'Clearly we must come to some understanding over the boy.'

'Did you see him at the Metropolitan, then, to-night?'

'Was he there?'

'Yes, and with ——' It was on the tip of her tongue to add 'Rosita,' but something in Esteban's complete lack of interest in Ramon and his affairs stopped her. Perhaps she had been right, after all, and he did not know that the child was at the moment in the next room.

Meanwhile Esteban was looking at her rather too steadily to please her.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Nina,' he began, after a pause, 'is it true that you still care for me? I met the twins a little while back and they seemed quite certain you did.'

'They should learn to mind their own business.'

'But how very dull that would make life, Ninetta!' he went on, with increasing eagerness. 'Why did you treat me so badly in that summer before the war? You quite broke my heart and probably hurt yourself a good deal, too.'

This was the last subject she had expected him to touch on, and she stared doubtfully into the fire for some minutes. Finally she murmured: 'It seemed the best thing to do — to leave you to your own people and your career.'

'But it wasn't fair to any of us — Ramon — or Pierre Chanel — or me.'

Nina sighed. 'Don't you know that worried me no end? And I suppose you won't believe me when I tell you that I did it all trying to play the game.'

Esteban laid his hand on hers. 'Just how much my mother had to do with it — only you and she know,' he said sadly.

Nina looked enormously relieved. 'When did you

find out? Did she tell you how she threatened Ramon if I didn't get out of your way forever?'

In his turn, Esteban sighed heavily. 'My mother has always been unscrupulous when she wanted her own way.'

'And she hated me,' said Nina.

'And I was a stiff-necked young fool then,' he added.

'I won't hear you say that. Oh, probably, Esteban, it was all for the best. We each had our work to do in the world — which we never should have done if I'd hung about your neck all these years. You and I have both been unhappy — yes. But now we can be friends again.'

She was about to embark immediately on a recital of Ramon's romance when the sound of several voices raised in heated altercation in the hall outside brought them both to their feet.

'Why, surely that's my mother's voice,' said Esteban.

'And what is she doing here?' asked Nina.

The question was to be answered almost at once. For now the door burst open and Doña Juanita, dragging an exceedingly hysterical Rosita with her, appeared on the threshold. She was followed by a wrathful Ramon. In the background a concerned Waterman hovered.

'What does all this mean?' cried Nina.

At first, perceiving nobody but Nina to be in the room, Doña Juanita gave way to a naturally vindictive and flaming temper.

'Madame de Segovia,' she cried harshly, 'how is it I find, after forbidding my niece to have anything to do with him, that this young man has prevailed on her to meet him clandestinely? Receiving a warning from a

friend of mine, on my return to her grandmother's house after the opera, at last I forced her cousin to confess what had become of Rosita. I came on here at once — and,' she ended dramatically, 'as I am about to step into the elevator, they step out of it.'

'Which was rotten luck,' said Ramon. And, coming up to Nina, he added passionately, 'She is a she devil — she boxed Rosita's ears.'

'And would yours for two *pesetas*,' cried Doña Juanita. 'But wait till I get her home, and tell her Uncle Esteban.'

She broke off to stare at Rosita furiously, who had now begun to laugh as helplessly as she had been weeping.

'No need to wait till you get home,' she muttered. 'He was here only a few minutes ago.'

But, thinking her to be merely temporarily bereft of sense, Doña Juanita took not the slightest notice of Rosita's announcement.

'So let me warn you,' she continued, sweeping up to the sofa and Nina, 'before worse happens. Hands off —— Rosita is not for your son; a circus waif's child and nameless into the bargain.'

Struck by the tremendous and venomous force with which she flung the speech at Nina — who apparently was not going to rebut the accusation — Ramon went and stood by his mother. Of course the woman was crazy. But he was horrified to hear her give utterance to such lies.

'You don't know what you're saying!' he cried furiously. 'How dare you?'

Doña Juanita regarded him with a contempt that cut him like a whiplash.

'I say no more than the truth,' she returned icily. 'She would be hard put to give a name to the church in which she was married to your father. And do you think for one instant we should allow Rosita to have anything to do with people so questionable as you and Nina Hanana? Oh, I know her of old. Let her keep to her friends of the circus and opera. It is a world that suits her perfectly. But as to your marrying this bad, deceitful little chit here ——'

A calm voice from the shadows beyond the fireplace now asked, 'And why not?'

Doña Juanita swung round. 'Esteban!' she cried. 'What are you doing here?'

'You see,' said Rosita. 'I told you he was here.'

Esteban stepped into the circle of war. 'The time has come, I think,' he said, 'for an explanation.'

Still at once laughing and crying, Rosita flung herself upon him. 'Uncle Esteban!' she cried; 'oh, dear Uncle Esteban, do be on our side and help us.'

'The best action he can perform is to remove you at once from this place,' remarked Doña Juanita somberly.

'But I won't go — I love Ramon and he loves me. And we don't care what you all say. We shall elope sooner or later,' cried Rosita defiantly; 'we shall get married in spite of you.' Then she cast herself in a heap on the sofa.

'The ridiculous talk of a schoolgirl.'

From behind Rosita's too moist pocket-handkerchief a muttered 'It's not ridiculous!' issued.

And Esteban, sitting down beside the absurd little figure, began to dry her eyes and comfort her, though always with a hint of amusement in his air.

'Come,' he said gently, 'pull yourself together, Rose. No one is going to be harsh with you ——'

'But I won't give up Ramon.'

'Is this really the young man you've been already in disgrace for?'

'Yes,' said she, between two great sobs.

'If only you'd told me his name at first,' said Esteban, and he looked at Nina. 'What time does to us! Here we all are at another point of departure.'

Nina, returning his look, ended by making a face at him. 'Oh, dear,' she said helplessly, 'you'll have to tell them, Esteban. I can't.'

'You mean that?'

'Certainly.'

'You give me free leave to explain things ——'

'Yes.'

'And my own way?'

'Yes.'

Utterly at sea by this time, Ramon asked: 'What is it all about? What should the Duke tell us, Nina?'

Doña Juanita laughed. 'I should hardly think you need ask that. Look in the mirror on the wall behind you. There lies the answer to your question.' Her tone was bitterly contemptuous.

'What does she mean?' asked Ramon, and, as no one answered him, he strode over to the mirror above the lacquered Chinese cabinet as Doña Juanita had suggested. 'I can't see anything really wrong with my face,' he said, after a moment's careful survey.

'And there isn't,' cried Rosita warmly. 'You look just grand — as you always do. You're easily the best-looking boy I know.'

Doña Juanita laughed again. 'Why do you pretend to be blind? Can't you see how like you are to the Duke? Don't you know he's your father?'

Ramon turned and stared at Esteban. They could see how hard he was gripping the surface of the cabinet. 'Is it — it can't be true,' he said in a low tone. 'Pierre Chanel was my father. Nina!'

Like a little boy he went to her for comfort and support in this moment of stress. Nina put her arm round him and said slowly: 'No, Ramon, darling; I always meant to tell you when you were twenty-one. But you were four months old when I first met Pierre. I was running away from Esteban then.'

'Then what she says is true?'

Again Doña Juanita broke in malevolently. 'It's perfectly true. You are the son of Nina Hanana and the Duke there — without benefit of clergy ——'

'No — that's not true,' Esteban said vigorously. 'Nina and I were married according to gypsy rites the actual night I ran away with her from Ronda — Ramon is my heir and always has been.'

Doña Juanita, looking suddenly very old, let herself down heavily into the nearest chair. 'What are you saying?' she demanded hoarsely.

'I am saying aloud what Nina has kept in her heart for years. You must have frightened her terribly, Mother, all those years ago in England. That, I have always found it hard to forgive you. For I hadn't the slightest chance to put anything right — till ages after, and things were in a pretty tangle. At first I imagined Nina did not wish ever to remember our gypsy marriage. But after I had talked with Pierre Chanel once in Paris

after the war — I knew a great deal more of what had been happening to ruin our lives than I did before ——'

'You talked to Pierre?'

'Yes — and I was guided by his very excellent sense. It was better to let things rest then. Nina, you had a man who adored you in Pierre.'

'I know,' said she softly.

Ramon went up to Esteban. 'As you are the head of my house,' he said formally, 'can I have Rosita for my wife'?

Esteban held out his hand. 'All in good time, lad, all in good time,' he replied.

Doña Juanita got up wearily from her chair. 'I do not think I am needed here,' she said. 'For me — *la commedia è finita.*' And she went out of the room.

Esteban turned to Nina. 'Shall we not have a little happiness together at last, *adorada?*'

And Nina Hanana, at the height of her fame, left the singing world, without a regret, forever.

THE END

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